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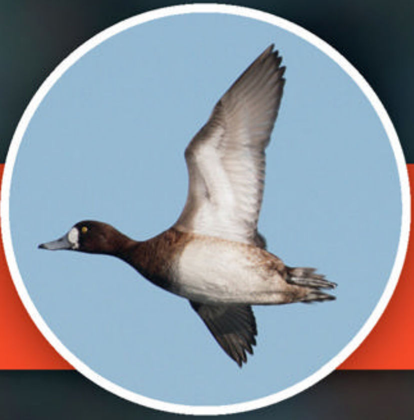

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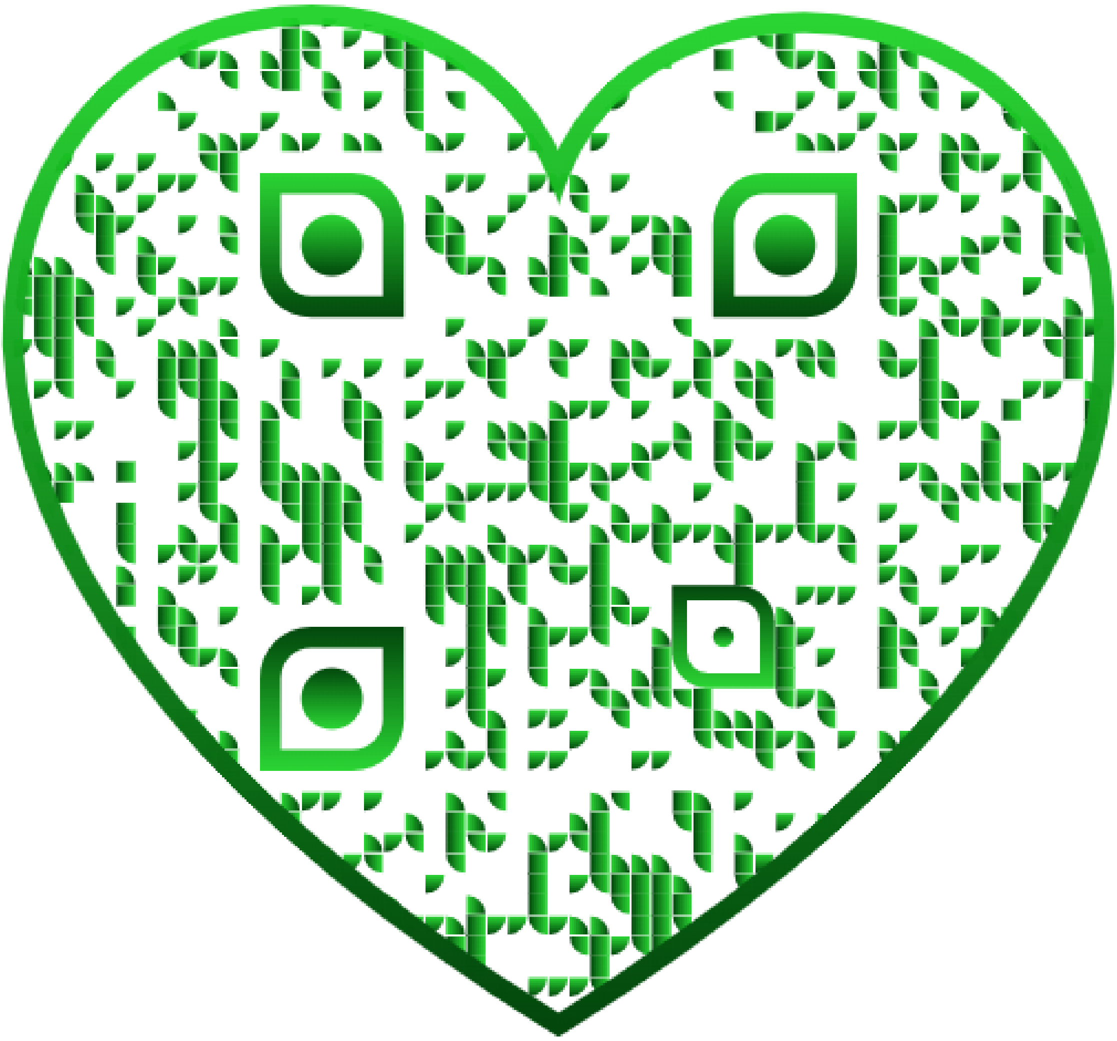

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COVER PHOTOS: CROSSBILL BY NICK SAUNDERS (BIRDIMAGENCY.COM)' DESERT WHEATEAR BY KIT DAY; GREATER SCAUP BY MIKE DANZENBAKER (AGAMI.NL)

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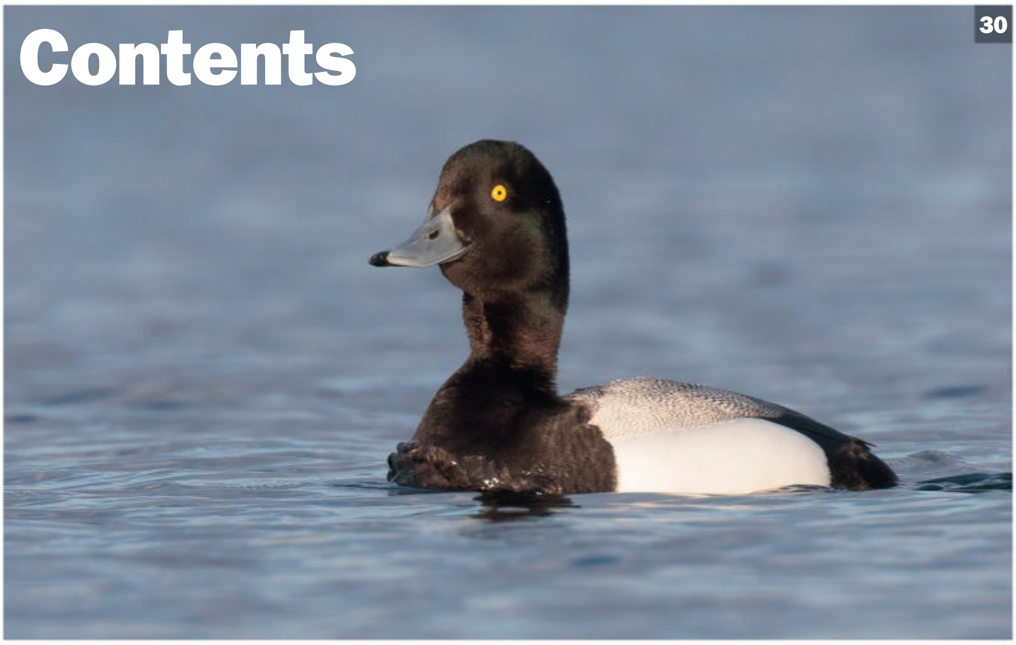

GREATER SCAUP BY JOSH JONES

ONE of the staples of winter birding across my patches is searching through the large numbers of diving duck that winter locally. This has proven productive in recent years, with multiple Ring-necked Duck and a drake Ferruginous Duck being the rarest prizes.

However, a species I look forward to seeing each winter is Greater Scaup. In line with a national decline, this bulky *Aythya* has become harder to find locally in recent years, almost as much so as some of its rarer relatives, but one or two usually still appear each season.

This is one of those classic patch-birding species and one which oozes quality for so many reasons. First, there is the attractive shape and structure as well as the imposing size, with some birds towering over their Tufted Duck congeners, helping them to stand out. Then there is the identification challenge: no two scaup look the same, giving each one I see an individual quality. With immatures, it's brilliant to watch the plumage develop throughout their first winter, with birds arriving rather brown and nondescript in autumn but leaving altogether shinier and adult-like the following spring. Then there is the scarcity value. This is, as Dan Owen writes in his scaup ID feature (pages 30-34), a thinly distributed species these days, making it a prize just about everywhere in Britain. Every time I pick out a Greater Scaup among my local Tufted Duck, I feel that shot of adrenaline that we all experience with a good find; I'm sure many of you would say the same.

Unfortunately, population and distribution data suggests that this species will become even scarcer in Britain in the years to come, so if you cross paths with one in the coming weeks, be sure to make the most of the encounter.

Josh Jones

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EUROPEAN ROBIN BY ED STUBBS

On the wrong side of the world

It was early November 2006 when one of the most celebrated of all vagrants to reach Britain was discovered. Such was the unexpectedness of the bird's arrival that thousands made the trip to Devon to see it, anticipating that the chance to see another would surely never come. This led to what this very magazine described as the 'twitch of the century' (*Birdwatch* 175: 55-57).

The bird in question was a Long-billed Murrelet, a scantily known North Pacific alcid that nests in conifer trees in the old-growth forests from Hokkaido, Japan, north to Kamchatka, Russia. This extraordinary breeding biology, coupled with the species being genuinely tricky to see anywhere in the world, immediately had twitchers captivated. Many had not even heard of the species when news of the Devon bird broke. The mainland location further facilitated a huge twitch, as did the news of its continued presence breaking early on a Saturday morning, giving birders the entire weekend to connect. The stage was set.

Over the course of the four days the murrelet proved twitchable, from 11-14 November, more than 3,000 birders are estimated to have paid homage to it, making it one of Britain's largest-ever twitches. However, there was a fortuitous element to it all, for this immense gathering might have never happened. The initial discovery of the bird was made by Dave Hopkins on 7th, but an understandable lack of awareness of the species resulted in a convoluted journey to its identification three days later.

Three days is a long time for any vagrant seabird to linger and the murrelet could easily have decided at any point between Tuesday and Saturday that the waters off Dawlish were not to its liking. In fact, when the ID was realised on Friday 10th, local birders drew a blank in their efforts to relocate it. For a time it looked like birders wouldn't get a shot at adding Long-billed Murrelet to their lists.

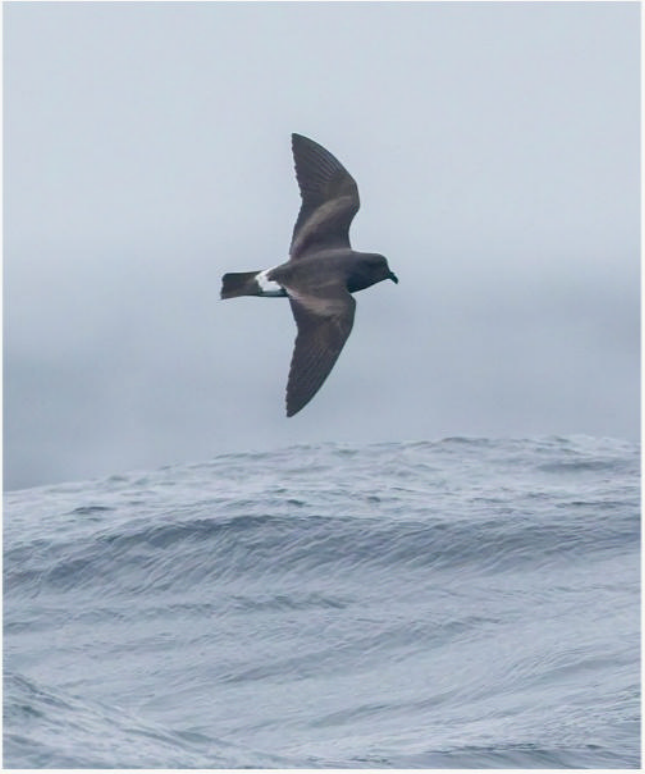
But this tale ultimately had a happy ending, putting smiles on thousands of twitchers' faces and bringing a welcome out-of-season boost to the seaside town's economy. Amazingly, following the famous Ancient Murrelet on Lundy in the early 1990s, the discovery of the Long-billed meant that Devon could boast two species of murrelet on its list. Neither has occurred anywhere in Britain since. ■

MAIN IMAGE: DAVE APPLETON; INSET: OLIVER SMART

Long-billed Murrelet, Dawlish, Devon

Madeiran magic!

A major development in our understanding of Madeiran Storm Petrel's status in British waters came from the Southwest Approaches during September, as expedition organiser *Scott Reid* reports.


SCOTT REID

September's discovery of dozens of Madeiran Storm Petrels at the continental shelf edge came as a big shock and rewrites our understanding of this enigmatic species in British waters.

Finder's Report

Madeiran Storm Petrels, Southwest Approaches, September 2025

DEPARTING Plymouth on 14 September aboard the sailing yacht *Challenger 4*, 10 intrepid birders and six skilled sailing crew embarked on the second 'Challenger Expedition' to the south-west extremity of British waters, a small network of deep underwater canyons on the edge of the European continental shelf. Following a successful maiden voyage in 2024, which involved multiple sightings of Madeiran Storm Petrel, anticipation was off the scale as we battled our way out into the fierce Atlantic Ocean, which hurled 40-knot westerly winds at our sails and 5-m seas at our bow.

The adverse weather had already delayed us and as a result we would only spend three days exploring the waters of the shelf edge, as opposed to the five that we had hoped for. As it happened this mattered little, as on our final evening we were to experience one of the greatest seabirding spectacles ever witnessed in British waters.

Having already crept into double figures of Madeiran Storm Petrel records over the three days, we sailed north to the Dangaard Canyon for one final chumming session in the three hours of daylight that remained.

Drifting north-east up the canyon with torrential rain making conditions immensely challenging, we soon found ourselves at the epicentre of an extraordinary movement of Madeiran Storm Petrels. Over the two hours that followed we counted a remarkable yet conservative total of 84 birds! These large, powerful storm petrels were on a very obvious north-to-south track, seemingly departing the canyons and moving towards the deeper waters of Biscay, adeptly powering into a stiff south-westerly breeze.

In the biblical weather we recorded new birds as they arrived on our bow from downwind, in groups of up to three, and watched them move down our chum slick beyond the stern. They passed close down both starboard and portside, often within 10 m of the boat. Occasional scans of the horizon to the north would reveal multiple Madeiran Storm Petrels at any one time, banking up above wave crests, as far as the eye could see. At one point nine birds were visible fizzing around our chum slick, while another two were arriving on the bow. Only six Wilson's and 10 European Storm Petrels were counted during the same period. Madeirans were still moving in good numbers when we ceased counting as the light faded. We sat below deck that evening, stunned, trying to process what we had seen.

SCOTT REID

A Madeiran Storm Petrel giving the large and long-winged appearance.

Throughout the expedition, good numbers of other seabirds filled the gaps between the excitement of Madeiran Storm Petrels. Wilson's Storm Petrels were ever-present, Cory's and Great Shearwaters buzzed past the boat in low densities and 42 Long-tailed Skuas, which included a loose group of 15 birds pursuing gulls and storm petrels over the slick, were thoroughly enjoyed by all.

The discovery of such concentrations of Madeiran Storm Petrels in these waters is an historic moment in British ornithology. In summer 2022 I began exploring the logistical possibilities for a pelagic seabirding expedition to this small area of continental-shelf edge, some 250 km south-west of Scilly, with the primary aim of establishing the status of the species as a regular visitor to British waters, and not a rare vagrant as it is currently considered. Three years later, and with two successful expeditions now completed, the true status of the species in Britain, plus the potential importance of the greater Whittard Canyon complex for the species as a whole, is becoming clear.

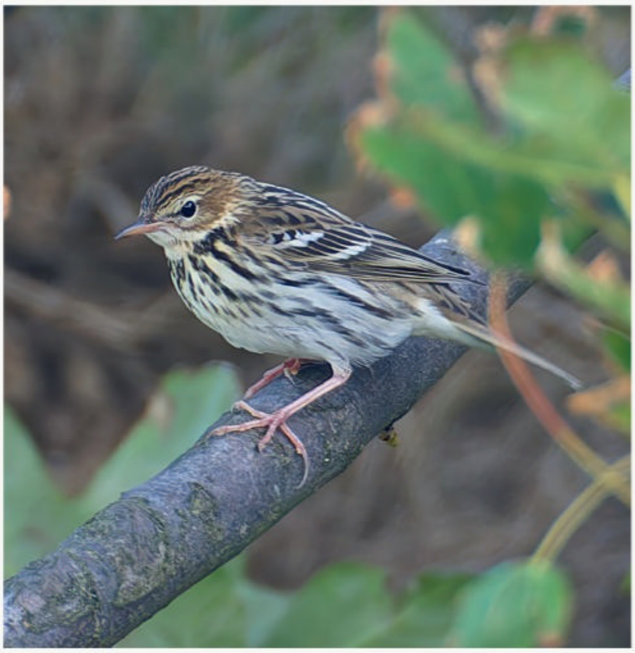
This unimaginable experience was shared with an incredible team of birders: Bob Flood, Paul French, Peter Stronach, Paul Connaughton, Jake Everitt, Ian Barnard, Mike Edgecombe, Anthony Griffiths and Vaughan Watkins. I am eternally grateful to each of them for joining and contributing heavily to every aspect of the expedition.

The highly skilled Tall Ships crew of *Challenger 4,* led by Sue Geary, sailed us through some extreme conditions, particularly during our passage to the shelf edge on 15-16th as we battled the high seas.

We returned to port via the Isles of Scilly, where Bob and I disembarked. Setting foot on land for the first time in six days, the birding team and crew enjoyed celebratory drinks in the pubs of Hugh Town, sharing tales of their pioneering week at sea. The next job is to finalise the dates for the Challenger Expedition 2026! ■

East-coast 'Pech' draws in the crowds

Stephen Egglestone discovered Britain's first twitchable mainland Pechora Pipit for 18 years thanks to his well-established morning routine.


COLIN BRADSHAW

After a glut of British records in the late 2000s and early 2010s, Pechora Pipit has become less frequent in its occurrences in recent years – a stark contrast to numerous other Siberian vagrants.

Finder's Report

Pechora Pipit, Co Durham, 21-22 September 2025

SUNDAY 21 September started with my usual routine of taking the dog out for a walk around my local estate in South Shields, Co Durham. After the heavy overnight rainfall, I thought I'd give Trow Quarry a look in the hope of something different bird-wise.

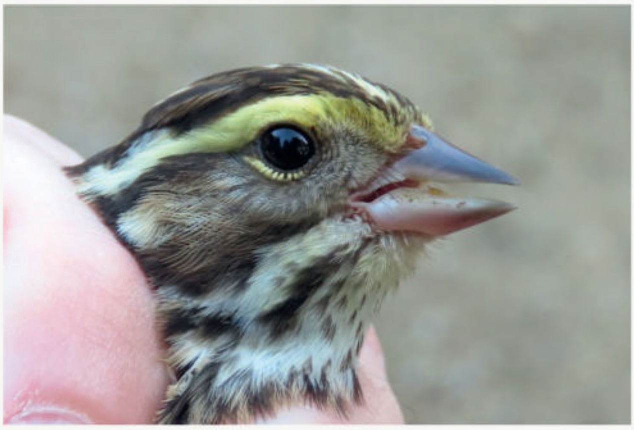
A flock of 120 Pink-footed Geese went over as I headed towards the main quarry – my first of the autumn. Being a creature of habit, I took my usual route around the quarry, where I met local birder John Chapman. Between us we saw one of the local Little Owls, a couple of Common Chiffchaffs and a Blackcap. The east end of the quarry was also quiet and I thought about my next move. Should I head for Gun Rock, the Leas Mound, or go back the way I came for another look?

I worked my way back but saw little different until I reached the Little Owl tree in the west section, where a pipit flew up out of the rough vegetation and landed in the tree. I thought it looked different, but it flew onto the cliff side and disappeared from view a few seconds later. Despite its brief showing of only 20 seconds or so, thankfully I managed a record shot which I posted on social media – the ID of the bird was soon confirmed as a Pechora Pipit!

It was very much a case of being in the right place at the right time. Trow Quarry strikes again almost 16 years after hosting Britain's first Eastern Crowned Warbler. Lingering until the next day, the Pechora proved to be the first twitchable mainland individual of its kind since a bird at Fishguard, Pembrokeshire, for five days in November 2007. ■

Brows raised

A ringing session on the Dorset coast resulted in _Joe Stockwell_ extracting an East Asian bunting on his last net round.


JOE STOCKWELL

The Dorset Yellow-browed Bunting mirrors the only other recent British record of the species (at Sandwich Bay, Kent, in October 2022) in that it was trapped, ringed, released and never seen again.

Finder's Report

Yellow-browed Bunting, Dorset, 29 September 2025

ALTHOUGH I've been ringing at Abbotsbury Swannery since 2018, this autumn has seen a much greater effort made to ring migrant passerines before we open to the public at 10 am. I am fortunate enough to have two areas of habitat where I ring – one is the withy bed and the other is our wild meadow with two net rides cut through some rank weeds and encroaching reed. I only started using this latter site during September 2025.

I was awake early on Monday 29 September, so I decided to head in and open some nets for a few hours. It was cool and clear with barely a breath of wind – ideal conditions. Upon setting the meadow nets I decided to test a new bunting lure I had created in the hope of drawing in some Reed Buntings and maybe something slightly rarer, such as a Cirl or even a Little Bunting.

The first two rounds saw a Reed and a Cetti's Warbler trapped but it seemed fairly quiet. After having a quick chat with Steve Groves I did another net round. Approaching my last net I realised I'd caught two buntings almost next to the tape lure and assumed both would be Reed. I took the first bunting by the legs and noticed some fine streaking to its flanks. I extracted the intriguing bird, turned it over to place it in the ringers' grip and was stunned to see a bright yellow supercilium staring back at me!

Some slightly unsavoury words may have left my lips at this point, before I made a quick phone call to confirm that I had indeed just extracted a Yellow-browed Bunting, because I couldn't quite believe it myself. I ushered Steve over and he was clearly as shocked as I was.

The birds were taken back for processing in my ringing shed, where all doors and windows were promptly closed! The bird was ringed, biometrics taken and notes on its condition were made. We then took a few photos before releasing it, whereupon it flew north and pitched in some 200 m away before vanishing, not to be seen again. ■

JOSH JONES

It was a truly excellent month for Grey Phalarope, with repeated storms battering British and Irish coasts and delivering excellent numbers of this popular shorebird. As well as some impressive seawatching tallies, there were no fewer than 30 individuals found at inland waterbodies. Many of these were typically fearless, such as this first-winter that performed at point-blank range along the dam at Rutland Water for five days from 2nd.

Mass arrivals

From phalaropes to ibis, it was a month of major influxes – but with some top rarities in the mix too. *Sam Viles* reports.

Highlights at a glance

7-11th	Black-winged Kite at Hickling Broad, Norfolk
11th	South Polar Skua past Pendeen, Cornwall
16th	Lesser Kestrel on St Kilda, Outer Hebrides
20-22nd	Swainson's Thrush on Barra, Outer Hebrides
17-19th	95+ Madeiran Storm Petrels at sea
21-22nd	Pechora Pipit at South Shields, Durham
23rd	Eastern Bonelli's Warbler on Unst, Shetland
28th	Black-faced Bunting at Noness, Mainland Shetland
29th	Yellow-browed Bunting at Abbotsbury Swannery, Dorset
29th	Grey-cheeked Thrush on Lundy, Devon
29th	Siberian Thrush at Scatsta, Mainland Shetland
29-30th	Swainson's Thrush at Malin More, Donegal

Britain and Ireland

September 2025

SEPTEMBER is a month that varies wildly in its birding make-up depending on prevailing weather conditions. But instead of the more expected east-coast falls or mega American arrivals, September 2025 will be most fondly remembered for an historic influx of Glossy Ibis.

A minimum of 605 individuals was totalled across Britain and Ireland combined on 8th. The first signs that something highly unusual was happening kicked off three days earlier, with a flock of approximately 30 birds in north-west England followed by 22 over Skokholm, Pembrokeshire, and then 15 arriving in off the sea at Portland, Dorset, the next morning. These were soon followed by multiple large flocks across southern England, Wales and Ireland.

The British record for a single flock was smashed twice, with at least 99 at Chew Valley Lake, Avon, on 12th (plus an additional 27 at neighbouring Blagdon Lake) pipping a flock of 92 noted moving between Cornwall and Devon on 8th. Meanwhile, 31 at White's Marsh, Co Cork, set a new Irish high count. While numbers soon dropped away, birds remained widespread for the rest of September. All told, in excess of 500 sites as far north as Shetland cashed in.

Other rare waterbirds to arrive from the south included a Black Stork in Devon, Squacco Herons in Cambridgeshire and Co Cork and six Purple Herons, plus a Little Bittern sound-recorded over Weymouth, Dorset.

Superstar 'Sibe'

With only 14 previous records, many of which were seen by a handful of birders, Siberian Thrush must be one of the most alluring species on the British list. It is no surprise, therefore, that a first-winter male at Scatsta, Mainland Shetland, on 29th was lapped up by gleeful holidaying birders. Another Shetland star was the Eastern Bonelli's Warbler at Houland, Unst, on 23rd – the fourth occurrence of the species in Britain this year.

Unfortunately, a bunting at Noness was reidentified as a Black-faced too late in the day for most birders in Shetland to catch up with it. Other birds in the archipelago included Pallas's Grasshopper and Eastern Subalpine Warblers, Rustic Bunting (with another on Scilly), two Hornemann's Arctic Redpolls and two Citrine Wagtails (with a third in Lothian).

Brown Shrike records are on an upward trajectory in Britain but adult males remain popular and one at Hunmanby Gap, North Yorkshire, on 25th was well received. First-winters were on Fair Isle, Shetland, and Papa Westray, Orkney.

Isabelline Wheatear is another species on the up. One on Lewis was a first for the Outer Hebrides, with others at Land's End Airport, Cornwall, and Seaham, Co Durham, equally admired. Another class bird for the last county was the first twitchable mainland Pechora Pipit for 18 years at South Shields (see page 9).

Twitchers last had a chance to see Yellow-browed Bunting in the 1990s, so one trapped in Dorset (see page 9) would have proved a major draw if it had been seen again. A Lesser Grey Shrike in Norfolk was popular, with a first-winter isabelline shrike species found in the county at the month's end. Also noteworthy were Black-headed Bunting on Scilly, Tawny Pipit in Norfolk and Red-throated Pipit in Lancashire.

It wasn't a vintage month for Nearctic landbirds, but Swainson's Thrushes reached the Outer Hebrides and Co Donegal, a Grey-cheeked Thrush was on Lundy, Devon, a Red-eyed Vireo on Barra and an American Pipit on North Ronaldsay, Orkney.

GLYN SELLORS

Good numbers of Sabine's Gulls were seen again this month, with an increasing proportion of them being pristine juveniles such as this one at Aberavon, Glamorgan, on 20th.

A Booted Warbler was trapped and ringed at Portland, Dorset, and a Paddyfield Warbler spent three days on St Mary's, Scilly. Additional warbler totals consisted of three Western Bonelli's, four Arctic – including an amazing inland record at Great Wigborough, Essex – six Blyth's Reed, 12 Greenish and 13 Melodious. At least three Zitting Cisticolas remained in Suffolk, with four Siberian Stonechats – all looking safe bets for the western *maurus* subspecies – arriving from mid-month.

RICHARD STONIER

Early September 2025 will be remembered for its massive influx of Glossy Ibis. Several hundred individuals appeared across Britain and Ireland, with a peak count of 99 at Chew Valley Lake, Avon, and several other large flocks recorded. Perhaps such arrivals will become regular in the future.

Further news comprised three each of Rosy Starling and Richard's Pipit, four Greater Short-toed Larks, 30 Red-backed Shrikes, 44 Hoopoes and 108 Wrynecks, plus nine apiece of Ortolan and Little Buntings, Bluethroats and European Red-rumped Swallows. A Red-flanked Bluetail at John O'Groats, Caithness, on 28th was the first of the autumn.

Phalaropes aplenty

It feels like many years since we last enjoyed such a good showing of phalaropes as was seen this month. Stormy conditions drove many inshore, with South Wales alone registering as many as 50 Grey and two Red-necked Phalaropes, while overall totals for Britain and Ireland pushed closer to 400 Grey and 16 Red-necked. Inland birders wouldn't miss out either, with 30 Grey and four Red-necked found at landlocked locales. Impressively, birders could enjoy close looks at the two species foraging together at three sites – Gwithian, Cornwall, Cheddar Reservoir, Somerset, and Lisvane Reservoir, Glamorgan.

Meanwhile, it was a strong showing from Wilson's Phalarope, too, with at least three in Co Kerry in addition to birds in Co Antrim and Co Clare. Another was at Ythan Estuary, Aberdeenshire.

Curlew Sandpiper looks to have had a healthy breeding season, with juveniles pretty much everywhere throughout September. A staggering total of 100 juveniles was counted at Seafield, Co Clare, with other notable flocks including 93 on South Uist, Outer Hebrides, and 60 on Holy Island, Northumberland, with some good totals racked up inland, too.

Terek Sandpiper records have nosedived in recent times and one at Ballysadare Bay, Co Sligo, was the first to reach Britain and Ireland in five years. Only the 10th for Ireland, it is also a county first. A Marsh Sandpiper at Musselburgh, Lothian, from 6th – Scotland's first since 2014 – complemented one lingering in Gwent. A first-winter Black-winged Pratincole spent two days near Loch Calder, Caithness, two Pacific Golden Plovers were found and a Great Snipe was on Fair Isle. Aptly, a Kentish Plover was discovered in Kent.

A juvenile Stilt Sandpiper at Broad Lough, Co Wicklow, from 1-3rd was one of the best finds from across the pond. Juveniles are a much rarer commodity than adults in Britain and Ireland, with only a handful of records of this age class occurring since the turn of the century. Baird's Sandpiper had a very good month, with 13 in Britain and six in Ireland. One at Eyebrook Reservoir, Leicestershire, made for a notable inland record, while three were on St Kilda, Outer Hebrides.

Three juvenile Spotted Sandpipers arrived in the South-West, with two on Scilly and one at Bude, Cornwall. Otherwise, Nearctic shorebird totals consisted of three Long-billed Dowitchers, seven White-rumped Sandpipers, nine Lesser Yellowlegs, 10 Semipalmated Sandpipers, 15 American Golden Plovers, 39 Buff-breasted Sandpipers and 69 Pectoral Sandpipers, plus the Western Sandpiper still in Ayrshire.

JOSH JONES

A total of 15 American Golden Plovers was amassed across Britain and Ireland during September. Among those was this beautiful juvenile on Achill Island, Co Mayo, here helpfully showing off its grey axillaries.

RICHARD STONIER

One of the more distinctive Scopoli's Shearwaters to be photographed in Scilly waters was seen from a pelagic trip on 26th. Far fewer individuals have been seen this year compared with 2023 and 2024.

Surprises at sea

One of the most momentous British birding events in many years concerned a minimum of 95 Madeiran Storm Petrels totalled at the continental shelf south-west of Scilly (see page 8), transporting the status of this species from mega rarity to expected visitor overnight. From land, one was reported past Coverack, Cornwall, on 2nd. A Scopoli's Shearwater was a further rare treat observed at the shelf edge, while at least two more were photographed from pelagics off Scilly.

A South Polar Skua close inshore past Pendeen on 11th was expertly documented and became only the second Cornish record after one last autumn. Others followed in Co Cork waters on 22nd and off Scilly on 29th. Three different Fea's-type Petrels were noted on 10th, with two off Cornwall and one tracked along the Co Durham and Northumberland coasts. Others were off Cornwall on 1st, Dorset on 2nd and North Yorkshire on 6th. Completing the rare seabirds were a Barolo Shearwater past Pendeen on 4th and a candidate Yelkouan Shearwater off Bardsey Island, Caernarfonshire, on 16th.

Wilson's Storm Petrel remained present in noteworthy numbers well into September, with 133 of the 192 seen at continental shelf. Singles off

Cromer, Norfolk, and from the Oban-Colonsay ferry, Argyll, were very notable. There were massive estimates of 53,000 Great Shearwaters off Lizard Point, Cornwall, on 9th and 20,000 past Galley Head, Co Cork, on 14th.

Conditions aligned mid-month for storm-blown Leach's Storm Petrels in north-west England. A peak count of 34 came from Hilbre Island, Cheshire, on 16th. Elsewhere, Bridges of Ross, Co Clare, registered a count of 95.

Sabine's Gull had another excellent month, with some 170 sites treated to sightings of this beautiful larid. A new Welsh record count was set with 33 past Strumble Head, Pembrokeshire, on 1st, while seven lingering juveniles at Aberavon, Glamorgan, were a draw for many birders. Inland, juveniles appeared in Derbyshire, Shropshire and Borders.

A juvenile White-winged Tern off Strumble Head was a surprise seawatch record, with one at Marshside RSPB, Lancashire, a slightly more expected location. In Dorset, the adult Forster's Tern surfaced in Poole Harbour on 1st and again on 20th – its first appearances since April. A Franklin's Gull put in a brief appearance on Westray, Orkney, the Laughing Gull remained in Co Kerry and Bonaparte's Gulls were in three counties. Four Ring-billed Gulls were in western Ireland.

Returning mega?

A Black-winged Kite at Hickling Broad, Norfolk, was a major talking point, and the site will be familiar to many as the location where numerous twitchers first encountered this species in Britain back in July 2023. It could be a coincidence that this latest example has found the same pocket of the Norfolk Broads to its liking, but one wonders whether the same bird might be involved in both sightings. Intriguingly, it was seen carrying sticks on more than one occasion, and the species is known to breed all year round. Presumably it is the relocating Gloucestershire bird from late August.

A ghostly grey male Pallid Harrier stunned onlookers near Cley, Norfolk, on 27th, and there was a brief sighting of a ringtail in Gloucestershire. A Lesser Kestrel on St Kilda, Outer Hebrides, was expertly picked out. Elsewhere were five Montagu's Harriers, two Black Kites and a single Red-footed Falcon.

A Lesser White-fronted Goose with Pink-footed Geese at Howgate, Lothian, on 28th sparked plenty of debate as to its origin, with a myriad of escapes, Swedish releases and maybe the odd wild vagrant on offer in recent years. A mini-influx of Taiga Bean Geese to northern Scotland saw 17 in Orkney and two on Lewis, Outer Hebrides. Additionally, two were in Northumberland. Aberdeenshire hosted a Snow Goose.

Shetland visitors were given the runaround by a mobile Blue-winged Teal, while the resident drake American Black Duck was reported in Co Mayo for the first time since March.

A handful of Lesser Scaup included Northamptonshire's first at Stanford Reservoir, this likely to be one of the two males relocating from Belvide Reservoir, Staffordshire. There were also sightings elsewhere in Staffordshire and Warwickshire, with others in Ayrshire and Co Donegal. Several Ring-necked Duck included three together in Co Mayo. Long-staying White-winged Scoter were still in Angus (two) and Lothian. ■

KIT DAY

A truly outstanding inland find involved this smart Arctic Warbler at Great Wigborough, Essex. It was one of only four individuals of the species seen in Britain during September.

JAMES LOWEN

This confiding adult Lesser Grey Shrike put in an eight-day stay at Winterton Dunes NNR, Norfolk, until 29th. Red-backed and Isabelline Shrikes were also seen in the county during September.

BRUCE TAYLOR

Swainson's Thrush has been the most regular North American thrush to appear in Britain and Ireland in recent years. This classy-looking bird on Barra, Outer Hebrides, was one of two seen during September.

KLAUS DRISSNER

Thrills aplenty

Above: The third Prothonotary Warbler for the Azores and the WP appeared on Corvo on 27th among a healthy arrival of North American landbirds.

Megas from both east and west were among the highlights of an event-filled September, as *Sam Viles* reports.

Western Palearctic

September 2025

CORVO did it again with a radiant Prothonotary Warbler on 27th. This, the third WP record, headlined a glut of early 'Yank' sightings on the Azorean island: Northern Waterthrush, American Yellow Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, two American Redstarts, Bobolink, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, multiple Red-eyed Vireos, Northern Harrier and two Cackling Geese also featured.

Earlier in the month, an American Cliff Swallow was a brief visitor to Cabo da Praia, Terceira, while Snowy Egrets were on Flores and São Miguel. Also causing a stir on São Miguel was an adult male Great-tailed Grackle from 1st, having surely arrived via ship. The species regularly takes advantage of boats to travel around, with past regional records from Britain, France, Spain and the Canary Islands.

The most migratory member of its family that breeds right up into eastern Canada, in contrast with its more resident southern congener, a Common Grackle record would likely be taken seriously in Britain. On 11th, a female photographed in flight over Amsterdam became the second record for the Netherlands.

The Dutch highlight was a Tennessee Warbler trapped and ringed on Vlieland on 17th. A national first, it unfortunately couldn't be relocated after release. A Greater Sand Plover and an apparent first-winter Red-tailed Shrike were on Texel, while an immature Steppe Eagle was tracked across the country on 26-27th.

Utsira is Norway's premier rarity hot-spot for good reason, with a juvenile Dark-sided Flycatcher there on 25th being only the fourth WP record and a second for Norway. It is also the third regional occurrence in three years, but was suspected to have been predated by a Eurasian Sparrowhawk later that evening.

Elsewhere, Norway's first twitchable Long-legged Buzzard at Hamnes was popular, while gleeful Danish twitchers enjoyed stunning views of a very lost juvenile Brown Booby in Esbjerg Harbour.

South-easterlies delivered the goods to the Faroe Islands, where a special run of rare finds included the archipelago's second Caspian Gull among other European vagrants. But it was singles of Red-eyed Vireo and Blackpoll Warbler on Sandoy that stole the headlines, with these being the first and second national records respectively.

With only 15 previous records, Glossy Ibis remains a rare visitor to Iceland, but that number was swelled by seven this month and included one on a ship between Iceland and Greenland. Another reached the northern tip of Norway at Varanger. Iceland's second Eastern Olivaceous Warbler reached Stafafell, with other national highlights including the country's fifth Pacific Golden Plover, Red-eyed Vireo, American Pipit and Franklin's Gull.

Two Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers trapped this month must be the tip of the iceberg, with one in France followed by another in Poland. Serbia's second Dusky Warbler, trapped at Ludaš, was another case of a surely under-recorded bird.

It was another exciting spell for seabirds off the north Spanish coast, with Estaca de Bares producing Black-capped Petrel, Red-footed Booby and at least 32 South Polar Skuas. Further east, mainland Spain's fourth Red-billed Tropicbird was observed passing Tapia de Casariego. The second confirmed Cape Verde Shearwater for both Spain and continental Europe was photographed among a small group of Cory's Shearwaters from a pelagic along the Portuguese border off Huelva.

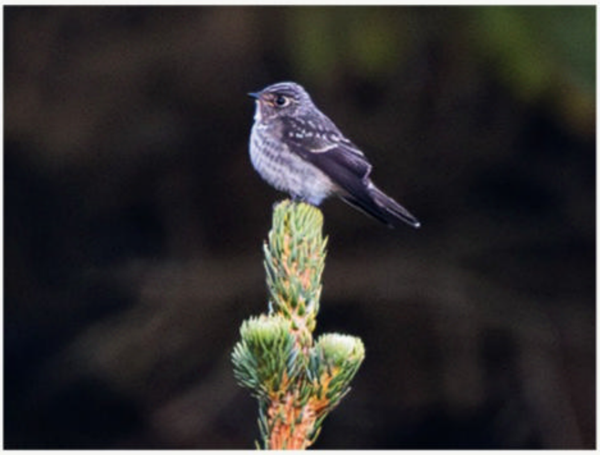
A Spur-winged Lapwing at Brazo del Este on 10th and a Levant Sparrowhawk over Tarifa on 30th were Spanish firsts. A dark-morph Western Reef Heron migrating with Little Egrets near Gijón was a first in the north of Spain, with other notable reports comprising five Elegant Terns near Cádiz and a Blue-cheeked Bee-eater at Tarifa.

In Portugal, there was a credible report of a Flesh-footed Shearwater past Cabo Raso and two South Polar Skuas were off Porto de Peniche. A tame Least Sandpiper was on Madeira. Sal, Cape Verde, boasted Western Willet and Short-billed Dowitcher, while a female Magnificent Frigatebird was noted off Brava.

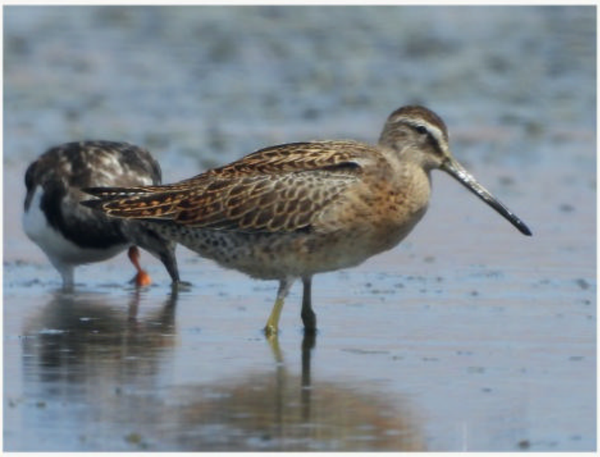
An exciting Eleonora's Falcon record concerned one flying towards the Kent coast from Cap Gris-Nez near Calais, France, on 12th, with a Brown Booby in the Bay of Biscay off Nouvelle-Aquitaine. Pleinmont on Guernsey, Channel Islands, hosted a Black-winged Kite. A Lesser Spotted Eagle was in Belgium, where an Eleonora's Falcon over Blankenberge became a national first.

Elsewhere, Croatia's second Isabelline Wheatear arrived on Pag, a Sykes's Warbler spent two days in Sweden and a first-summer Long-legged Buzzard was in north-west Germany. A Crested Honey Buzzard flew over Akrotiri, Cyprus, and a Masked Wagtail was in Kuwait.

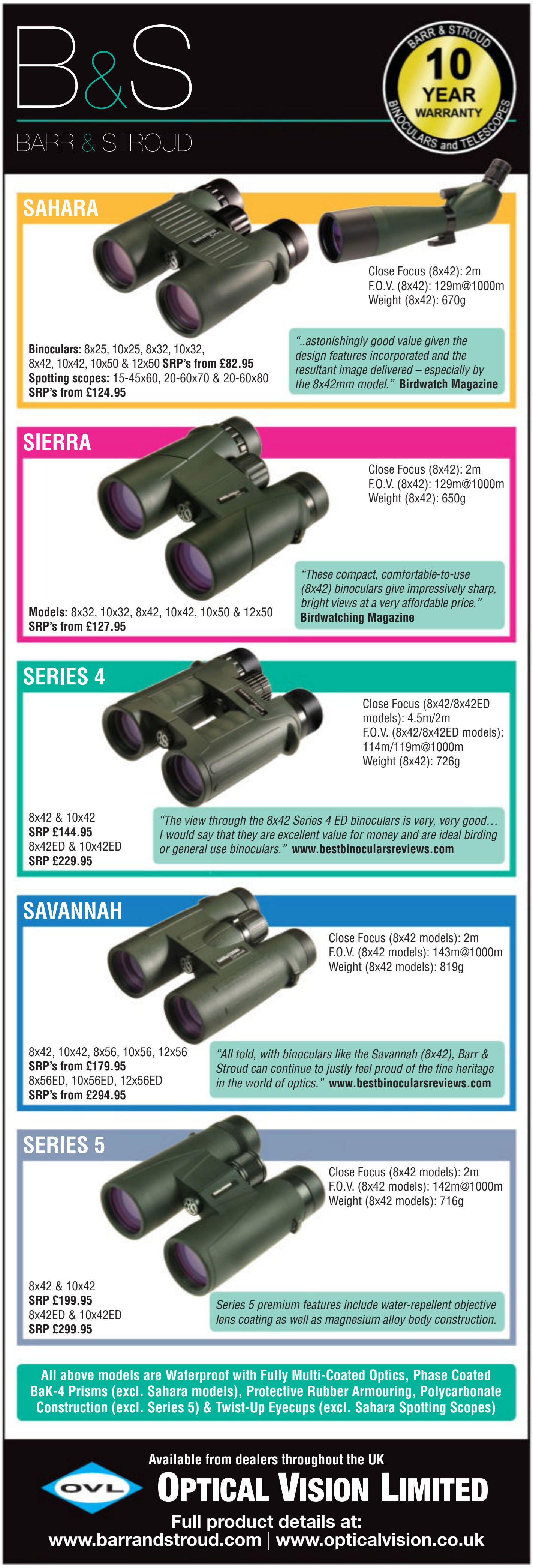
A targeted search for Tawny Eagle near Sidi Bel Abbès, Algeria, on 8th produced views of a distant adult, providing further solid evidence of the species' continued presence in the WP. ■


BJØRN MO

Norway's second Dark-sided Flycatcher was a thrilling find on Utsira on 25th. Unfortunately for would-be twitchers, the bird soon disappeared and is feared to have been predated.


UWE THOM

This juvenile Short-billed Dowitcher arrived on Sal, Cape Verde, on 12th. The first half of September is the prime time for juveniles of this species appearing in the WP.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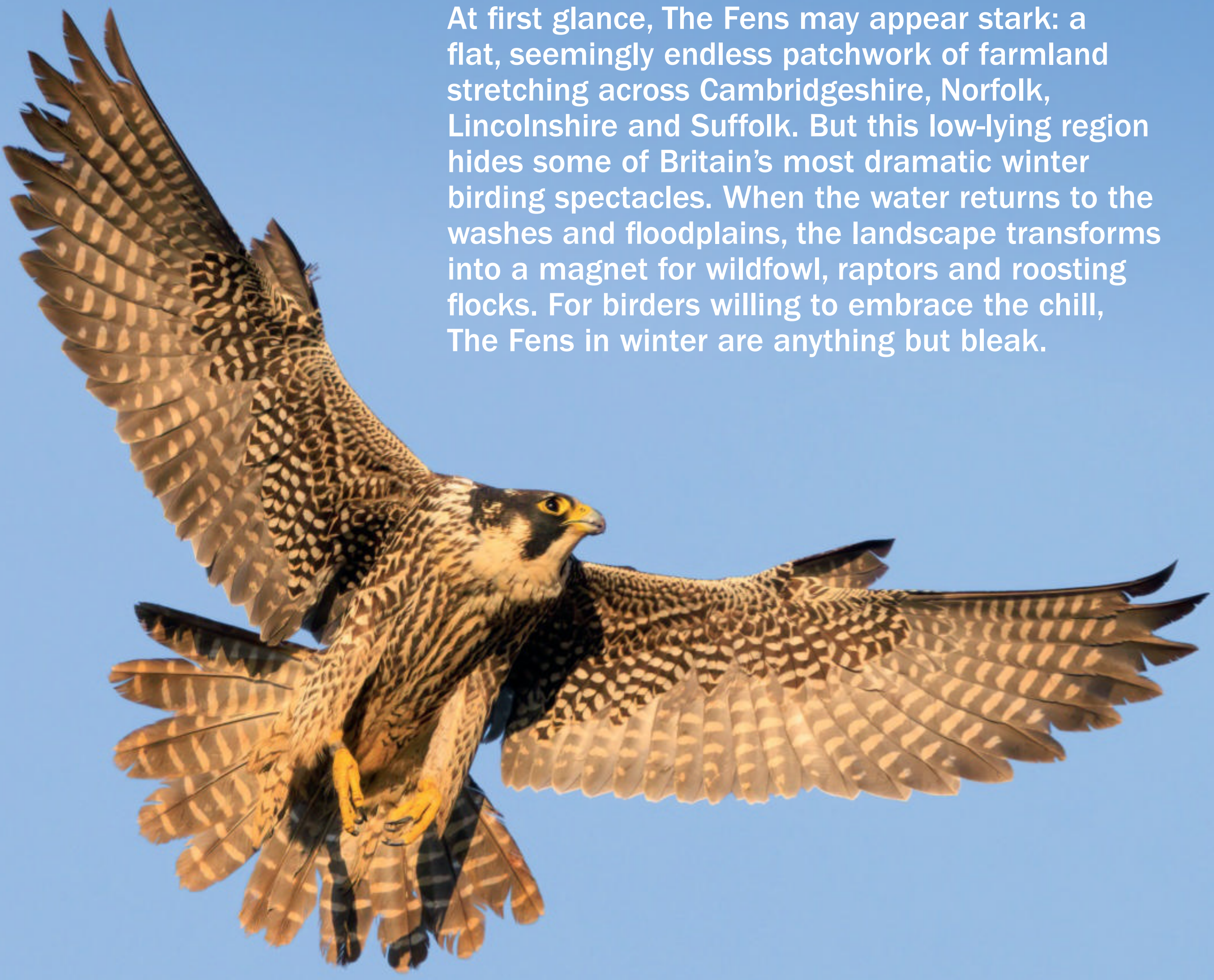
Birding The Fens in winter:

where big skies meet big flocks

At first glance, The Fens may appear stark: a flat, seemingly endless patchwork of farmland stretching across Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Suffolk. But this low-lying region hides some of Britain's most dramatic winter birding spectacles. When the water returns to the washes and floodplains, the landscape transforms into a magnet for wildfowl, raptors and roosting flocks. For birders willing to embrace the chill, The Fens in winter are anything but bleak.



Birds of prey such as Peregrine Falcon are a winter staple of the open fenland landscapes.

KIT DAY

OLEKSIY KARPENKO

Common Crane is one of our key target species on the tour.

MAL HARRIS

Huge flocks of European Golden Plovers swirl around the fields.

JOSH JONES

We will see herds of hundreds or even thousands of Whooper Swans.

KIT DAY

Encounters with the beautiful Short-eared Owl are on the cards.

THE Fens were once an immense wetland, a shifting mosaic of reedbeds, meres and marshes. Drainage schemes dating back to Roman times intensified between the 17th and 19th centuries, turning most of this landscape into farmland. Yet fragments remain: washes that flood in winter, ancient reedbeds and restored wetlands that are now strongholds for some of Britain's rarest species. These habitats not only provide shelter for iconic birds such as Common Crane and Hen Harrier but also stage some of the most impressive winter gatherings of birds anywhere in the country.

Winter arrivals

As Northern Europe freezes, The Fens become a refuge for all kinds of birds. Among the most stirring sights are the Whooper Swans, arriving from Iceland in family groups and turning the arable fields white. By day they feed in the fields, their snowy forms dotted across the stubble and earth. As dusk approaches, they lift off in unison, their bugling calls echoing across the landscape as they head to safe roosts on the great washlands. The smaller, more delicate Bewick's Swan also occurs, though numbers have dwindled in recent years and this species has become ever-trickier to find.

Duck flocks are equally impressive. The Ouse and Nene Washes can host tens of thousands of dabbling ducks in winter: Eurasian Wigeon, Eurasian Teal, Northern Pintail and Northern Shoveler create a living carpet of movement on the water. Keen-eyed birders scour these flocks for rarer visitors, with American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal and Ring-necked Duck appearing almost annually. The sheer density of birds is breathtaking, with the added excitement of never knowing what unusual species might be hiding in the crowd.

The drama of waders and raptors

Winter skies over The Fens are alive with movement. Northern Lapwings and European Golden Plovers gather in vast flocks, their twisting, flashing flights catching the low winter sun. When a Peregrine Falcon powers into view, panic erupts, the flocks wheeling as one to evade the predator's stoop. Western Marsh Harriers are a constant presence, floating effortlessly over reedbeds, while Common Kestrels and Common Buzzards watch from fence posts and telegraph poles. If luck is on your side, the ghostly form of a Hen Harrier may appear at dusk – the females and juveniles, known as 'ringtails', and the rarer pale grey males gliding silently into roost.

The magic of dusk

As daylight fades, The Fens offer some of their most unforgettable moments. Reedbeds become stages for evening gatherings: starlings murmurating in swirling patterns, wagtails and buntings dropping in to cover, and harriers drifting in to roost. Owls emerge with the dimming light. Barn Owls, abundant in the region, float ghost-like over rough grass, while Short-eared Owls patrol by day and dusk in invasion years, their yellow eyes bright against the gloom. Few experiences rival standing by a fenland reedbed on a still winter's evening, surrounded by the calls of wildfowl and the anticipation of a raptor's arrival.

Why the Fens in winter?

For birders, The Fens offer both spectacle and intimacy. There are the sweeping sights – thousands of wildfowl rising at once, or skies filled with European Golden Plover – but also the quieter moments: the soft calls of Whooper Swans, the sudden appearance of a Barn Owl or a visit from an inquisitive European Stonechat. Winter is when The Fens feel most elemental, the meeting point of ancient landscape and abundant life. ■

Join BirdGuides on our winter birding tour in The Fens

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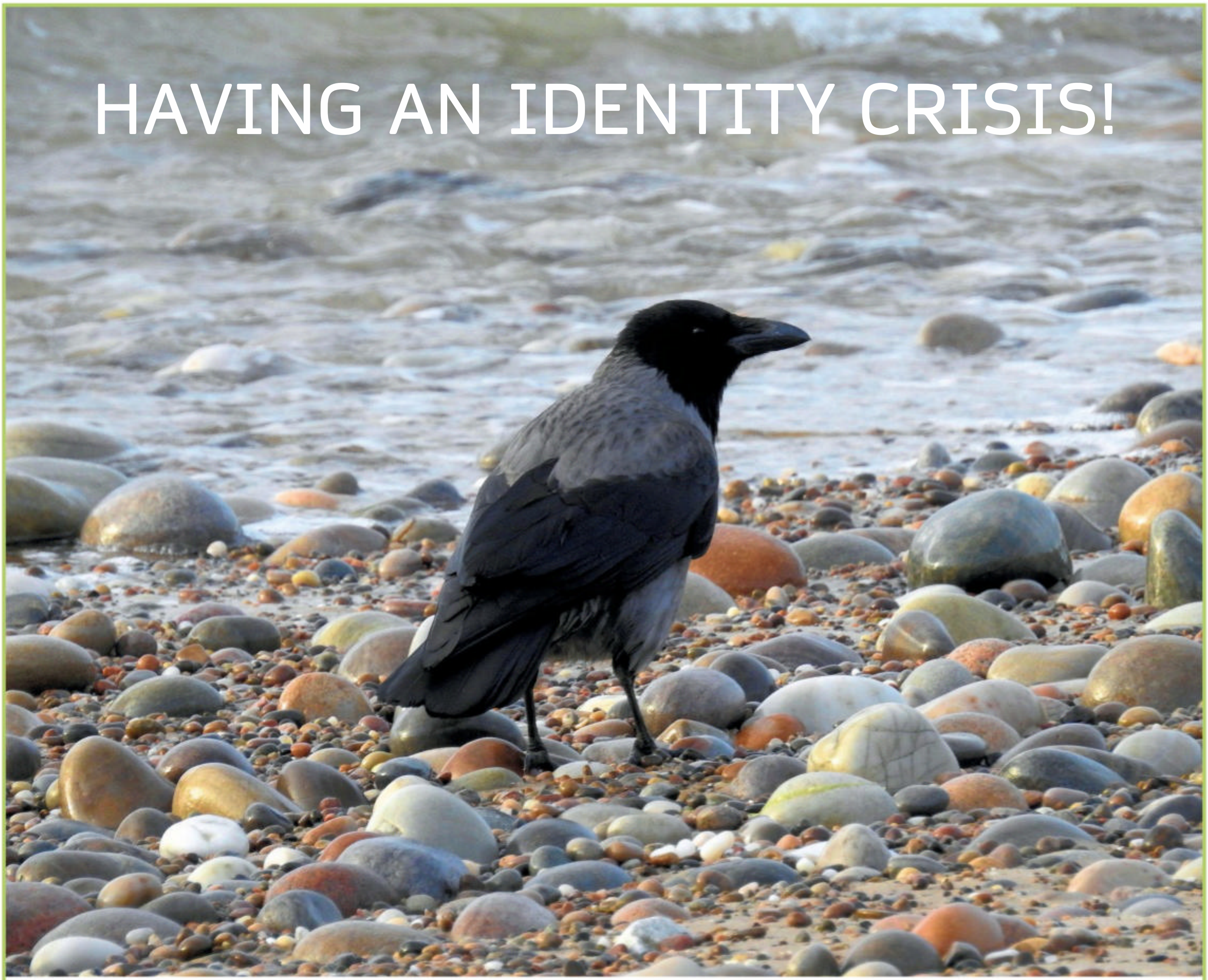

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DAVID CAMPBELL

Working out the weather

Do you know your isobars and occluded fronts? Our columnist used to pay little attention to the weather's impact on migration, but now he's engrossed.

One aspect of birding that I've felt the most ignorant of is the influence of weather on migration. I have been an active birder for more than 20 years, yet I feel as though I know about as much about the role of the weather as could be gleaned from a very short presentation or book chapter. And that is probably being generous.

I have to admit that for a long time I wasn't particularly interested. My approach was simply to be out as much as possible, usually at the same site in my earlier patch-watching days, so the forecast would have a limited bearing on my birding behaviour anyway.

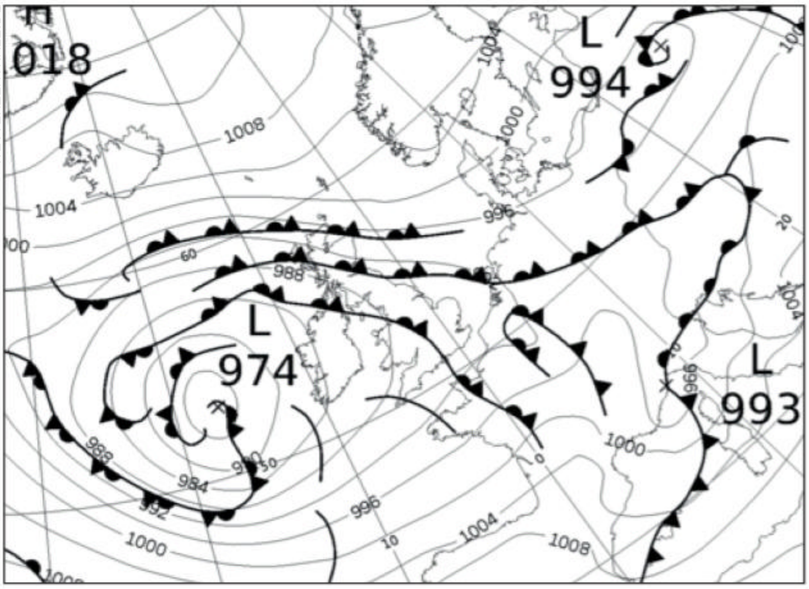
Rain or shine, easterly or westerly, I would be out. I knew the basic concepts, such as drift and the effect of cloud cover, but the time of year was what I paid the most attention to. Anything unusual that I was lucky enough to find, this being in landlocked Surrey, often didn't seem to be straight off the back of any supposedly promising system, so I stopped paying attention for a long time. I had Sandwich Terns migrating over farmland in clear sunshine and European Honey Buzzards flying over on horrid mornings; all I could do was put in whatever time I had.

My curiosity towards the interplay between weather and bird migration renewed when I moved to the coast, where the meeting of the two subjects is harder to ignore. The result has been more time on sites such as Ventusky, toggling between pressure, precipitation and wind-speed maps, and trying for the umpteenth time to remember which blue and red lines represent which types of front.

I've got to a place where I feel like I can better anticipate migration events and select a birding mission for the day based on the point in the calendar and after studying the weather map. What I'm still working on is getting my head around the mechanisms behind the movements, especially the contrasting drivers of overnight arrivals and visible migration during the day.

Not adding up

'Tailwinds aid migration while headwinds reveal it' is the nutshell explanation as to why a north-easterly is good news if you're checking bushes on the east coast at dawn, while south-westerlies produce spectacular diurnal migration events there. The idea is that birds fly lower and slower when there's a headwind broadly from their intended direction of travel, meaning they come within a detectable distance. I understand the logic of this but have trouble wrapping my head around why I almost never see birds going with a tailwind, even when it is gentle and the clouds are heavy. The 'preference' for headwinds appears so stark, yet reason and literature say they are anathema to migrants.



WETTERZENTRALE.DE

David has begun to appreciate the nuances of weather maps and their impact on bird migration since moving to the coast.

> I've got to a place where I feel like I can better anticipate migration events and select a birding mission for the day

Raptors, hirundines, pipits and finches alike track the coast by day here in Sussex into whichever wind is blowing roughly parallel to it. They sometimes fly east one day then west the next, mirroring the switches in wind direction. On several occasions in autumn, I've seen hirundines fly into a northerly, away from the sea, and it feels like I only see them depart across the Channel when there's a generous splash of southerly in the wind direction.

I may be a long way from understanding the decisions that the birds make on their migrations in relation to the weather, but at least I've tuned my understanding of which forecasts will generate good birding days. This has helped me foresee some unmissable days, and I've realised it's a strong foundation for being able to marvel at the challenges migrant birds face and the calculations they must make. ■

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MARK AVERY

What next for bird flu?

It's 20 years since the first confirmed case of HPAI in the UK. Our columnist reflects on some of the most severe outbreaks and wonders what the future holds.

We are approaching the 20th anniversary of the first confirmed case of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI; bird flu) in wild birds in the UK. That initial case presented an identification puzzle – not of the virus, but of the bird itself. A decomposed swan found in Cellardyke Harbour, Fife, was first identified as a Mute Swan, but days later reclassified as a Whooper Swan. Were there really no beak, legs or tail to provide a clue to its identity? At the time, neither the authorities nor the media appeared especially concerned with the species involved, despite the epidemiological implications being potentially very different for a migratory Whooper Swan heading to Iceland, perhaps from Denmark, compared with a resident Mute Swan.

Ever since, I've kept a close eye on which species have been reported with bird flu in the UK. A full list of species testing positive between 2016 and 2025 can be found on my blog (**markavery.info**). In that time, 87 species of wild bird have tested positive for avian influenza in this country.

From 2016-2021, bird flu was largely a winter phenomenon, with most detections coming from wildfowl during the colder months. In 2022, however, the virus broke through dramatically into the breeding season, hitting many colonial seabird species hard, including Great Skua and Northern Gannet. The following year brought further widespread mortality – 2023 is etched in my memory as the 'summer of Black-headed Gull deaths'. At my local patch, Stanwick Lakes in Northamptonshire, several paths were closed due to gulls dying on them, and a dead bird remained on the visitor-centre roof for days. Similar scenes played out at gull colonies across central and southern England. After a quieter 2024, cases have picked up again in 2025.

The first Bewick's Swan to test positive was recorded earlier this year in Lancashire. Other species newly confirmed with the virus in 2025 include Little Gull, Yellow-legged Gull (in Highland), Long-eared Owl, Common Starling and Greenfinch.

Wildfowl and beyond

What began as a winter disease of wildfowl, and then spread through colonial seabirds, has now been detected in a wide range of ecologically different species, including Red Grouse (2023), Great Spotted Woodpecker (2022), Hen Harrier (2022), Barn Owl (2022-25), Red Knot (2021) and Northern Lapwing (2021). The UK's most numerous 'wild bird', Common Pheasant, regularly tests positive too – sometimes in rearing sheds, but also in the wider countryside (2018, 2021-25).

ROBIN CHITTENDEN

The first UK HPAI bird-flu case was documented in 2016. The virus had left a deadly legacy on bird populations since then.

Among passerines, the list of affected species remains short and somewhat eclectic: Magpie (2022), Rook (2021), Carrion Crow (2022-23), Reed Warbler (2023), Blackbird (2022) and Pied Wagtail (2022). It's unclear how many passerines are submitted for testing, as negative results are not collated or published in the same way as positive ones. We therefore don't know whether the tits at your feeders are being overlooked by surveillance schemes or simply testing negative.

The evolving list of affected species is fascinating, puzzling and concerning in equal measure. Our understanding of the disease's impact remains incomplete, but it's clear that there were mass seabird die-offs in 2022 and 2023, and that well-monitored species, particularly raptors, have experienced reduced breeding numbers and success at several studied sites. Avian influenza hasn't gone away, and its next moves are impossible to predict. We will be living with its consequences for many years to come. ■

> "Avian influenza hasn't gone away, and its next moves are impossible to predict"

Crossbills are specialised feeders on conifer cones, and their unusual bill shape is an adaptation that enables them to extract seeds from the cones. Parrot Crossbill, pictured here, is a specialised feeder on the cones of Scots Pine.

MARKUS VARESVUO (AGAMI.NL)

The crossbill conundrum

With so many subtle clines in terms of both features and calls, the genus *Loxia* poses a classification nightmare throughout the Holarctic. After four decades of studying these fascinating finches, ***Craig W Benkman*** summarises the latest findings.

KEY FEATURED TAXA

- **Common Crossbill** *Loxia curvirostra* (Holarctic)
  - *L c balearica* (Mallorca)
  - *L c luzoniensis* (Philippines)
  - *L c meridionalis* (Vietnam)
  - *L c mesamericana* (Central America)
  - *L c percna* (Newfoundland)
  - *L c poliogyna* (North Africa)
  - *L c stricklandi* (Mexico)
- **Two-barred Crossbill** *Loxia leucoptera bifasciata* (Palearctic)
  - White-winged Crossbill *L l leucoptera* (Nearctic)
- **Hispaniolan Crossbill** *Loxia megaplaga* (Hispaniola)
- **Parrot Crossbill** *Loxia pytyopsittacus* (Western Palearctic)
- **Scottish Crossbill** *Loxia scotica* (Scotland)
- **Cassia Crossbill** *Loxia sinesciuris* (Colorado)

Crossbills spark the interest of most birders and naturalists. It is hard not to be curious about their bills. And who doesn't wonder why many populations nest at atypical times of year, or marvel at their ability to breed in the midst of winter? And then there's their nomadism – here for one or a few seasons and then gone indefinitely – such that one needs to take the opportunity to see crossbills when one can, especially because often we only get a fleeting glimpse. With persistence and sometimes a little luck, we are rewarded. And as an ornithologist and evolutionary ecologist with a passion for crossbills, I've been rewarded often during the last 40 years.

What attracted me to crossbills is their reliance on seeds in conifer cones and the ease with which one can measure the costs of foraging – the time taken to extract and husk a seed and swallow the kernel – and the benefits – the mass and energy of the seed kernel. Not only could I observe crossbills foraging on cones at the tips of branches in the canopy, but I could also bring them into captivity with appropriate permits – they are extremely tame – and collect cones of different conifers to ask further questions of the birds.

Cone complexities

When I started studying crossbills in 1982, my focus was on the foraging ecology of White-winged Crossbill and Common Crossbill in the north-eastern United States and adjacent Canada. Only gradually did I come to appreciate the breadth of questions worth answering with crossbills. This had been realised decades earlier by the famed myrmecologist and naturalist William Brown Jr, who wrote: "Were I an ornithologist, I think that the finches of the genus *Loxia* would take up most of my research time. No group of birds seems to offer more tantalising problems in that area of biology where systematics, ecology, zoogeography, population dynamics, and ethology overlap" (Brown 1957: 267).

The crossed mandibles and the accompanying skull and musculature enable crossbills to extract seeds secured between overlapping cone scales. The slender tips of mandibles allow the birds to bite with precision and to initiate gaps between the scales, while the curvature of the mandibles shifts the biting forces from shearing forces that could easily fracture the mandible to compression forces that are more easily withstood. Just think of what would happen to your teeth if they stuck straight out instead of being vertical and you bit on something hard. Once the tips of a crossbill's mandibles wedge between the scales, the lower mandible is pulled to the side while the upper mandible pushes against the opposing scale to expose the seed at the base. With the aid of their extrusible tongue, a seed is then lifted from between the scales and brought back to near the base of the mandibles where it is husked. This process is then repeated hundreds to several thousand times a day depending on the size of the seeds and the energy demands of the bird.

MARKUS VARESVUO (AGAMI.NL)

Two-barred Crossbill (pictured) breeds in the coniferous forests of the Palearctic. Its Nearctic counterpart, known as White-winged Crossbill, is touted by the author as a good split.

GEORGE DUNBAR

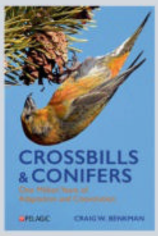
There is debate around Scottish Crossbill's status as a distinct species, with arguments against due to a lack of genetic divergence and the learned nature of its distinct calls.

Although the bill specialisation opens up tremendous opportunities, allowing crossbills to occur widely and exploit many species of cone-bearing conifers across the Northern Hemisphere, it also limits their proficiency at handling other food types and therefore weds crossbills to a life of tracking the vagaries of conifer cone crops. Challenges to crossbills can be extreme when conifer cone crops fail for a year or more over vast regions, which occurs periodically in the more northern boreal regions. Ian Newton, for example, documented Common Crossbills moving at least 2,600 km between natal sites and nesting areas in Eurasia. I suspect that White-winged Crossbills move that far if not farther across the northern boreal forests of North America.

At the other extreme are crossbills that rely on conifers adapted to high-intensity fires, which produce serotinous cones that remain closed for several or more years (even decades) until heated by a fire. The seeds in weathering serotinous cones of Rocky Mountain Lodgepole Pine (*Pinus contorta*) that accumulate in vast numbers on trees – because of the absence of tree squirrels – within two isolated ranges in the western USA are so consistently available that Cassia Crossbills can secure all their sustenance year-round every year within only 67 sq km of such forests. Indeed, it is this stability of seed resources and the absence of tree squirrels that set the stage for the coevolutionary arms race that has led to the large-billed, reproductively isolated Cassia Crossbill and to distinctly defended cones.

Exclusive book offer

Craig W Benkman's new book, *Crossbills & Conifers*, is out now and available in our Bookshop from £55. Visit **bit.ly/4gOMsDJ** to order your copy.



The beauty of crossbills is that we can make sense of this diversity of life histories once we quantify how and why seed availability varies in space and time. White-winged Crossbills timed eating over 44,000 seeds throughout the year in eastern Canada and the north-eastern US revealed that nesting was generally initiated – including in winter when temperatures plummeted to -40°C – when seed intake rates would be sufficient three weeks later for raising a family of three nestlings. Crossbills basically nest when they can although the need to moult might constrain nesting in late autumn.

PETE MORRIS (AGAMI.NL)

Hispaniolan Crossbill is endemic to the island of Hispaniola, meaning it is found only in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. It is the only representative of the *Loxia* genus in the Caribbean.

Loxia ancestry

Genetic studies of crossbills have been limited to date, but our prior and some preliminary genetic analyses provide insight into the evolution and diversification of crossbills, although much more will be revealed in the next few years. Crossbills share a common ancestor with Redpoll, with their divergence occurring between 750,000 and 1.4 million years ago. Not that long ago. The first crossbill split occurred within what was likely an ancestral 'wing-barred' crossbill, leading to the ancestors of Two-barred Crossbill in Eurasia and White-winged Crossbill in North America, with the former giving rise to Common Crossbill and the latter giving rise to Hispaniolan Crossbill. Whether Common Crossbill initially evolved in the Old World or New World is unknown, but they have subsequently radiated independently. If these preliminary analyses are confirmed, then it is only logical to recognise White-winged and Two-barred Crossbills as separate species. Moreover, it is hard to imagine offspring from hybrid pairs of these two taxa, differing so much in bill size and shape (White-winged Crossbills have uniquely slender upper mandibles), prospering in either North America or Eurasia.

SERGEY PISAREVSK

Crossbills are rather nomadic and irruptive, as conifer seed production can vary considerably from year to year. Birds may disperse widely when the cone crop in their particular region fails.

The great diversity of Common Crossbill writ large is what has attracted most of the attention, and here I include Parrot Crossbill, Scottish Crossbill and Cassia Crossbill. Besides the aforementioned three species of 'plain-winged crossbill', much of Common Crossbill diversity has been categorised into subspecies or geographic forms. These are best illustrated by the most distinctive and isolated Eurasian subspecies: the tiny-billed *Loxia curvirostra luzoniensis* in mountains in north-western Luzon, Philippines; the massive-billed *L c meridionalis* on the Langbian Plateau, Vietnam; a somewhat small-billed *L c balearica* on Mallorca; and *L c poliogyna* in the Atlas Mountains of North Africa. In North America, subspecific designations should be limited to perhaps only three taxa – *L c percna* on Newfoundland, *L c stricklandi* mostly in Mexico, and *L c mesamericana* in Central America – because all the other putative subspecies commonly co-occur with one or more 'subspecies' when nesting.

Classified by call

Thanks largely to the work of Jeff Groth conducted mostly in the 1980s, the remaining diversity of Common Crossbills in North America is best categorised by vocalisations, especially their contact or flight calls, into 'call types'. Based on Jeff's work, and also Ken Irwin's, there are 11 North American call types that include the subspecies mentioned above. Call types also differ in other vocalisations including song, but this is less well characterised. Each call type differs in average size from other commonly co-occurring call types, although often with tremendous size overlap. And at least five of the call types common in western North America (as

IAN DAVIES (AGAMI.NL)

Cassia Crosbill was described as recently as 2009, when it was found to be phylogenetically distinct from Common Crossbill, but it took eight years to be accepted as a full species.

well as Cassia Crossbill) are adapted for feeding on the seeds in cones of different species of conifers.

Whether these different North American call types deserve species designation in the same way as Cassia Crossbill is an open question. Ongoing genetic studies will help us judge, but, for now, I suspect that most if not all of the call types confined mostly to the United States should be referred to as call types or better yet ecotypes because of their adaptation to particular conifers. This is based not only on our published genetic studies showing limited genetic differentiation, but also fieldwork on reproductive isolation and assortative mating between two common call types – Types 2 and 5 – in the Rocky Mountains conducted by Cody Porter. Cody found that these two call types are strongly reproductively isolated when they are relying on the two conifers on which they are morphologically adapted: Ponderosa Pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) and Lodgepole Pine, respectively. But when they nest while feeding on Engelmann Spruce (*Picea engelmannii*), a conifer from which seeds are easily secured almost regardless of bill size, then reproductive isolation weakens presumably resulting in elevated levels of gene flow. Because most call types in North America share conifers such as Engelmann Spruce on which they breed, reproductive isolation and therefore speciation will likely remain incomplete.

Research required

In much of Eurasia, outside of the distinctive subspecies mentioned above on the periphery of the distribution of Common Crossbill, the picture is less clear in part because studies such as those undertaken by Jeff Groth, who characterised the vocalisations and morphology of hundreds of Common Crossbills across the United States, have yet to be conducted except by Ron Summers and others in Scotland. Especially perplexing is the great vocal diversity within European Common Crossbills for which there is apparently limited morphological variation. Unlike in North America, most pine species in Europe seemingly can support a Common Crossbill population. However, the number of described call types greatly exceeds the number of native conifer species. Furthermore, some of the call types seem to have disappeared while others have appeared recently. This suggests that either call types evolve quickly and are often ephemeral, or that some of the call types represent individuals arising from eruptions from far away whose local populations die out over time. Extensive surveying of vocalisations is a start, but until accompanying data on morphology, genetics and natural history are gathered we will have limited insight into the diversity of Europe's Common Crossbills. Such an effort would be worthwhile and would likely reveal surprises.

One surprise from our genetic studies in Europe is the genetic distinctiveness of Common Crossbills in areas dominated by Aleppo Pine (*Pinus halepensis*) in south-eastern Spain. More than 100 years ago, Common Crossbills in this region were designated as a distinct subspecies (*L c hispana*), but this fell out of favour. Nonetheless, the potential for a distinct population in this region piqued my interest because of their shared reliance with Cassia Crossbill on seeds in serotinous cones. We found that the two other subspecies of Common Crossbills that rely on Aleppo Pine – *L c balearica* on Mallorca and *L c poliogyna* in the Atlas Mountains of North Africa – are highly distinct genetically. Though this is not that surprising, because both of these subspecies are relatively sedentary and isolated geographically from other populations of Common Crossbills. However, Common Crossbills in south-eastern Spain are also rather distinct genetically. Given the nomadism of Common Crossbills across Europe with the opportunity for dispersal into southern Spain, this suggests that reliance on a relatively stable seed resource requiring local adaptation might facilitate speciation. This is one crossbill population crying out for study. There is still much to learn. ■

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Desert wanderer

Seen by some as heralding the end of autumn migration, a vagrant Desert Wheatear can provide a glimpse of the exotic on a gloomy day. ***Simon Papps*** takes a look at the species, including how British records have increased significantly in recent decades.

Some rarities have an uncanny knack of finding a home away from home when they turn up on our shores – an area of habitat which perfectly mimics their preferences on their own turf. This is trickier for some species than others. Take Desert Wheatear, for example. Surely its requirements are difficult to meet in this green and pleasant land? However, I've stood on windy, sand-blown strandlines at places such as Holkham Beach and Burnham Overy Dunes, both in Norfolk, on late autumn days and could clearly see why an off-course Desert Wheatear might substitute these barren landscapes dominated by sand and shingle for its usual stomping ground in the Sahara or Syrian Desert.

This habit is not just restricted to coastal locations. Remarkably, a female Desert Wheatear that ventured a short distance inland to Abberton Reservoir, Essex, in late October 2012 hit the habitat jackpot when it pitched up in a 'large sandpit' of material being used for work on the reservoir. Obviously the artificial creation was to the bird's liking because it lingered there for more than a week into November.

Distribution and vagrancy

Desert Wheatear has an extensive breeding range that begins in the west in Morocco and extends in a band across the far north of Africa, past the northern reaches of the Red Sea, and then continues patchily through the Middle East and Central Asia as far east as Mongolia and north-central China. On both breeding and wintering grounds these insectivores tend to favour dry sandy places with low rocks and vegetation that can be used as perches. Pairs nest in a hole in the ground such as an old rodent burrow.

Desert Wheatear is strongly associated with late-autumn birding in Britain, with some birders believing the first of the season heralds the end of peak migration.

JOSH JONES

RALPH MARTIN (AGAMI.NL)

Desert Wheatear breeds from Morocco across northern Africa, beyond the Red Sea, and patchily throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, reaching as far east as Mongolia and north-central China. This male was pictured on breeding grounds in Tajikistan.

Three subspecies are currently recognised and while some populations in parts of North Africa appear to be resident others are migratory, with some moving short distances and others crossing the Sahara to winter in the Sahel. Asian breeders are longer-distance migrants, wintering from north-west India through the Arabian Peninsula to north-east Africa.

Records from eBird indicate that vagrant Desert Wheatears have reached Taiwan, eastern China and Japan in the east, Malaysia and Sri Lanka in the south, and as far north as Finnish Lapland. Indeed, records in Europe are widespread, mainly from coastal locations around the Mediterranean, Bay of Biscay, North Sea and Baltic, while by contrast records from inland sites around the continent are somewhat scarce.

British increase

Numbers of records of Desert Wheatear in Britain have boomed in the past four decades. Accepted records from the period prior to the formation of the BBRC in 1959 do not even reach double figures. The species remained a true rarity well into the 1980s, with only a further dozen or so records between 1959 and 1985.

From that point, however, something happened that resulted in a significant uptick in records. It is possible that changing weather and climate patterns may have had something to do with this. Also, perhaps significantly, the increase began around the time when field guides started to become available giving better coverage to the wider WP, featuring detailed accounts and artworks covering the likes of Desert Wheatear. So, with the species suddenly coming onto the radar for a lot more observers, possibly this made people more inclined to take a second look at any wheatear they came across, particularly an obvious migrant by the coast. Therefore it could be that both climate change and greater observer awareness have played a role in upping the number of British records so impressively.

A black tail is key

Once familiar with the key features, the ID is fairly straightforward. All Desert Wheatears have the helpful field mark of an extensively black tail, with just a small area of white at the tops of the tail sides merging with the white rump – so there is no upside-down black 'T' with white borders as shown by other wheatears. Therefore, especially when seen in flight, the appearance of a pretty much all-black tail helps to distinguish Desert Wheatear not just from Northern Wheatear, but also from any of the other similar-looking possible vagrants to the UK and Ireland, namely Pied, Isabelline and Eastern and Western Black-eared Wheatears. Beware, though, that a closed tail can sometimes appear all black in the other species, particularly in Isabelline, which in some individuals can show restricted amounts of white on the tail sides, although never as little white as in Desert.

An adult male Desert Wheatear is a very striking and distinctive bird, with its pale sandy-buff plumage, and the black patch on the face and throat connecting to the black on the folded wing when the bird is perched. Females and first-winter birds can appear more nondescript and superficially resemble the equivalent age or sex of Northern Wheatear or other wheatear species. However, the body shape of Desert is more rounded and less elongated, with a slightly rounder head. The flight feathers of Desert are blackish, heavily edged whitish in autumn, while the dark underwing coverts contrasting with the slightly paler rest of the wing is another good feature if it can be seen; the underwing of Northern is more uniformly darkish. But the black tail is always the clincher.

Popular locations

To date, up to and including the year 2023, there have been 174 accepted British records of Desert Wheatear. The species shows a distinct bias towards coastal locations, particularly along the south and east coasts.

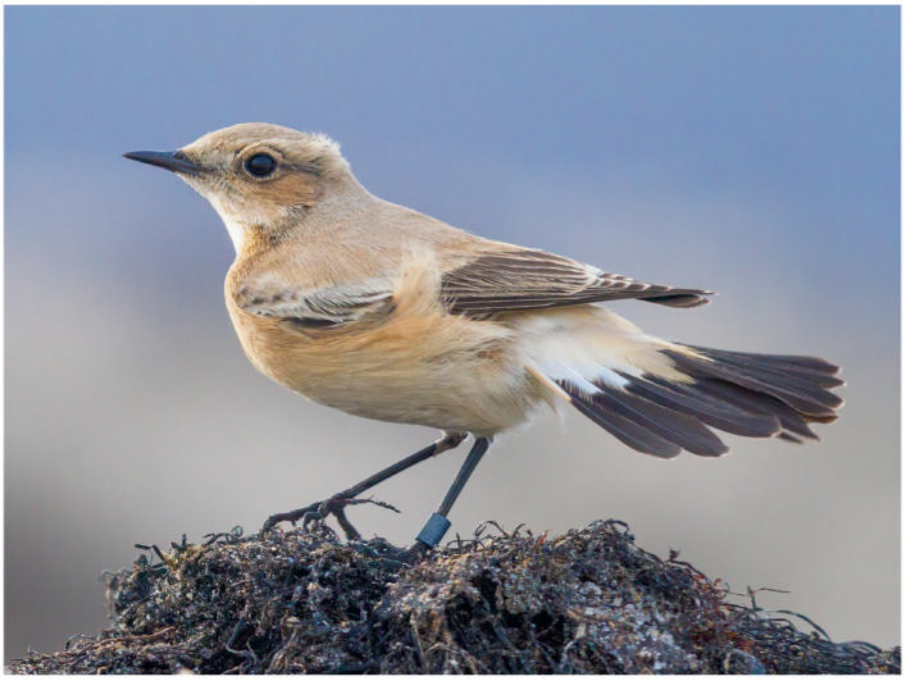
According to the BirdGuides records archive, Norfolk boasts a particularly impressive tally of 28 records – about 16% of the overall British total. Other east-coast counties have also fared well including, for example, totals of seven from East Yorkshire, eight from Northumberland and eight from Aberdeenshire. County totals along the south coast include 18 from Kent, nine from Sussex, 10 from Devon, 13 from Cornwall and five from Scilly.

There have been 11 records from Wales and 33 from Scotland, with the latter total including four from Orkney and 13 from Shetland. Somewhat surprisingly the species remains a real rarity in Ireland with only eight records.

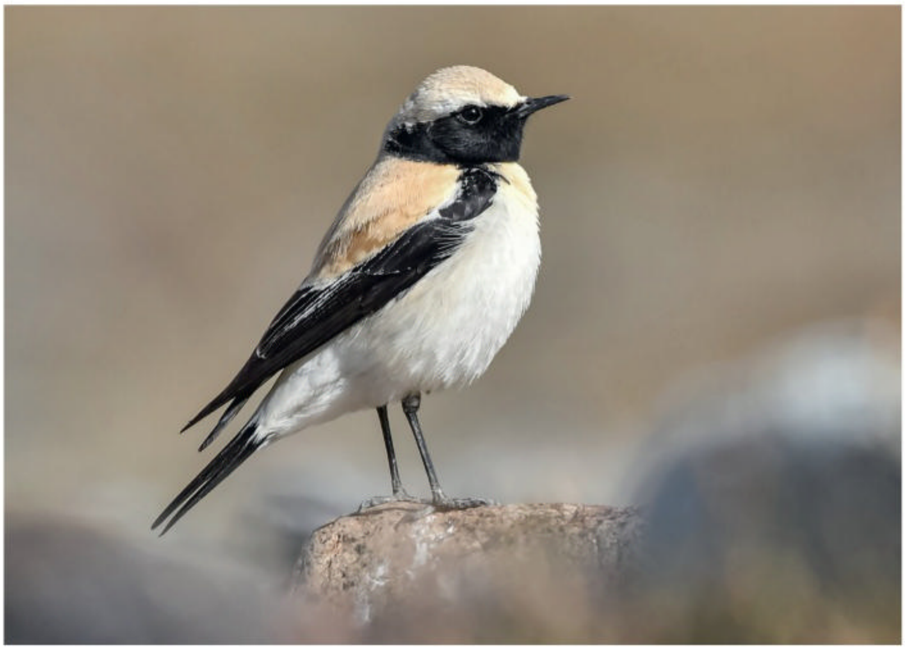
More unusual inland locations where the species has turned up include: Titterstone Clee Hill, Shropshire, in November 2011; Barton GP, Staffordshire, in November 1996; Irlam Moss, Greater Manchester, in March 2007; and an April 1989 record from Barn Elms Reservoir in central London, on the site that now holds the London Wetland Centre.

Although Desert Wheatear has become more regular in its visits to British shores in recent years, with an average of four or five records per year, its appearances are anything but predictable with occasional blank years such as 2001, 2009 and 2023 interspersed with moderate influxes in other years, most notably totals of 18 in 1997, 10 in 2003 and 18 in 2011.

Patterns show a small but significant spike in records in early spring, particularly from the south coast in March. Sometimes the spring arrival dates seem to tie in with the meteorological phenomenon of Saharan dust clouds stretching up to the UK, so keep your eyes on the skies for that red-orange hue and be particularly vigilant regarding any wheatear sightings soon after! Summer records are exceptional, making a male on playing fields near Keynsham, near Bristol, in mid-June 2025 particularly noteworthy.


ANDREAS TREPTE

Female Desert Wheatears are less boldly marked than males, showing a weak supercilium, pale lores and a plain head pattern. Helpfully, this ringed bird has been pictured showing its diagnostic tail pattern, which is almost entirely black bar the restricted white bases to the outer remiges.


IMRAN SHAH

There are three subspecies of Desert Wheatear: *atrogularis* in Transcaucasia, Iran, Afghanistan and Mongolia; *homochroa* from Western Sahara to western Egypt; and *oreophila* of western China, Kashmir, Tibet, Pakistan and north-east Africa. All have occurred in Britain.

Leaving it late

The absolute key time for Desert Wheatear to turn up here is from mid-October right through November and into early December, with birds towards the end of this period standing out in particular due to a lack of Northern Wheatears around at this time of year. November is by far the best month with more than 100 records to date. And it is fair to say that such late birds do indeed herald the end of the autumn migration period.

Good news for would-be Desert Wheatear twitchers is that the birds often stay put in a favoured spot for a few days. And occasionally an individual will attempt to winter, for example the birds at Newbiggin, Northumberland, from December 2011 to January 2012, or on St Agnes, Scilly, from December 2018 to January 2019. Sometimes they perhaps find the conditions of the British winter too harsh and sadly expire, such as the bird at Whitby, Yorkshire, in the winter of 2017-18.

Occasionally birds turn up in midwinter, but possibly this could be accounted for by birds relocating shorter distances after an earlier migration, rather than due to a fresh long-distance movement.

Late autumn is definitely the key period for Desert Wheatear, though. So remember to keep your eyes peeled if you're by the coast this October, November or even December. A sandy little waif hopping along the shoreline, or flitting between clumps of *Suaeda*, might just prove to be an exotic visitor from arid regions far away. ■

25x
35x

SWAROVSKI
OPTIK

ATC/STC

SEE THE *UNSEEN*

DAN OWEN

Scaup are beautiful birds. Both species show intricate vermiculations on the body feathers, although the extent of these depends on the age and sex of the individual.

Field ID notes

KEY FEATURED SPECIES

- **Greater Scaup** *Aythya marila*
- **Lesser Scaup** *Aythya affinis*

Greater and Lesser Scaup

The identification of two similar-looking diving duck is further complicated by an intermediate Nearctic form of the larger species, as *Dan Owen* discusses.

Greater Scaup is a scarce and declining winter visitor to Britain and Ireland, with the highest concentrations found around Scottish coasts. However, it is prone to turning up out of range and can appear on any waterbody. Breeding is very sporadic, making this the rarest breeding duck in Britain. Lesser Scaup, on the other hand, is a rare but increasing vagrant from North America. Both species are similar in appearance, with the North American *nearctica* subspecies of Greater Scaup even more closely resembling Lesser Scaup. Furthermore, lookalike *Aythya* hybrids add a layer of complexity and should also be taken into consideration.

The two species are closely related and indeed caused some headaches for pioneering American ornithologists. John James Audubon and Alexander Wilson both described 'Scaup' decades apart. However, they had actually described both species between them! Wilson lived near Philadelphia, worked the coast and illustrated Greater Scaup, whereas Audubon spent time exploring the lakes and rivers in the interior, and had illustrated what we now know as Lesser Scaup. Even once Lesser Scaup was described by Thomas C Eyton in 1838, that species was known as 'American Scaup', and it was thought that Greater Scaup lived only in Europe. Of course, it is now settled that Lesser Scaup does indeed live in America, but Greater Scaup is found across Asia, Europe and North America. To add to the confusion, American Greater Scaup is something of a midway point in appearance between Eurasian Greater Scaup and Lesser Scaup. This article will detail the differences between the three forms.

Greater Scaup

Status and distribution

Greater Scaup has a large global range and is the only circumpolar species within the *Aythya* genus. In Britain, most records come during the winter months and typically at the coast, with a northerly bias. However, this species does have a tendency to turn up at inland waterbodies, often with flocks of Tufted Duck or Common Pochard.

According to BTO data, roughly 6,400 Greater Scaup now winter in Britain, representing a 70% decrease between 1997 and 2022. However, the species has also seen a 56% range expansion, so is becoming more thinly spread overall. Udale Bay RSPB, Highland, remains a regular site. Other spots along the Moray Firth can produce flocks, as well as Loch Ryan, Dumfries and Galloway, although that population has suffered a sharp drop in recent years. There is a decent chance of finding one inland wherever flocks of *Aythya* congregate. Counts in the high double figures can be found at Loch Leven NNR, Perth and Kinross, but the days of 5,000 Greater Scaup at Loughs

Beg and Neagh in Northern Ireland are long gone.

Appearance

Greater Scaup is quite a chunky, well-built species. The head is rather large and rounded, with an apex before or over the eye. In adults the bill is blue, thick at the base and slightly spatulate. The nail is black and can extend slightly onto the surrounding bill tip. In immatures, the bill may appear duller and greyer. Some 'messiness' is often encountered, with a darker area on the culmen quite common.

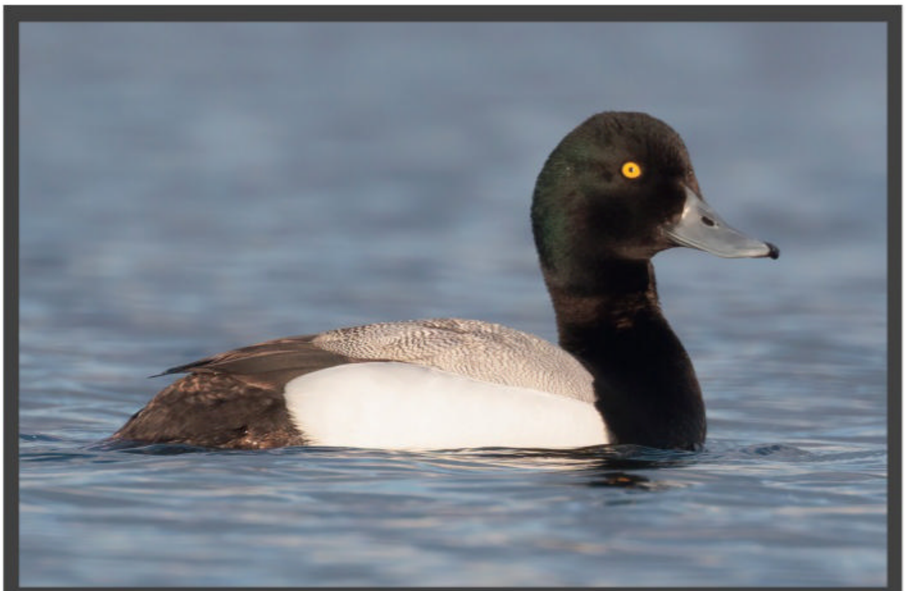
The spread wing is similar to Tufted Duck, with little variation in the white wing-bar. If anything, adult drakes may show more white extending into the primaries than females and immatures, though this is subtle.

An **adult drake** Greater Scaup has a green gloss to the head, though may appear all dark at a distance or sometimes even with a purple undertone. The crown lacks a tuft. The iris is bright yellow. The pale grey mantle is finely vermiculated and appears smooth at distance. The flanks are white, although some very fine vermiculations may be detected at close range. The breast and rear end are black.

As Greater Scaup is so seldom present in Britain during the summer months, the drake's eclipse plumage isn't one you're likely to come across here. Structure is consistent, the change being less dramatic than in other duck species. A small, pale facial disc may form around the bill, and other dark areas of plumage may appear blotchy. The flanks and mantle darken though remain vermiculated. Overall, the bird gains a 'muckier' appearance, but still looks like a drake Greater Scaup – any candidate shouldn't be confusable with a female.

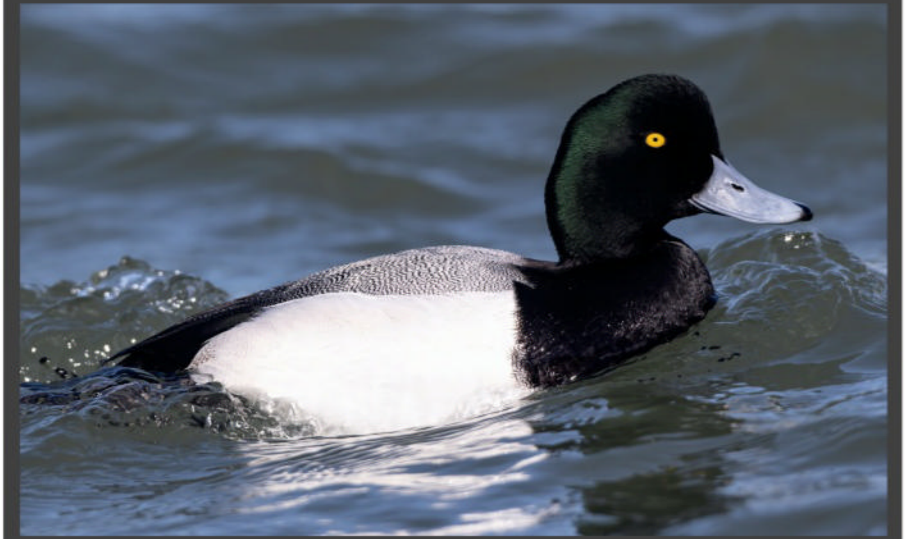
Adult females are striking in their own right, though extra caution should be taken to rule out hybrids for all female-types. The overall structure and bill are important to consider. An adult female is aged by a bright yellow iris; the mantle and flanks appear grey from a distance, and upon closer inspection coarse vermiculation is apparent. The head and breast are dark brown, with a broad white blaze encircling the bill, sometimes extending high up the forehead.

During spring and summer, females moult some head and body feathers, giving them a browner appearance, though the body is still scattered with



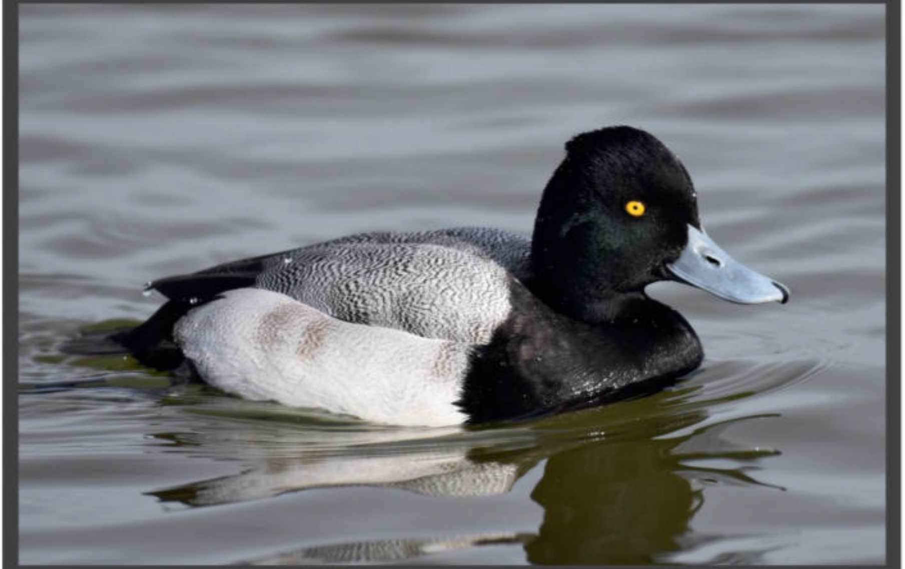
JOSH JONES

With its rounded head shape, bulky body, white flanks and finely vermiculated silvery-grey upperparts, drake Greater Scaup is an attractive bird. Photographed in May, this is a second-calendar-year bird, aged by the retained brown rear-end feathers.



CHUCK HOLMER

The *nearctica* form of Greater Scaup can only confidently be identified in full adult plumage. This individual shows the classic head shape with a steep, almost vertical climb to a bulging forehead, plus a 'hollow' in the rear crown. Note also the slightly coarser mantle vermiculations and darker lower mantle feathers; this combination can be quite obvious in some individuals.



LAURA WOLF

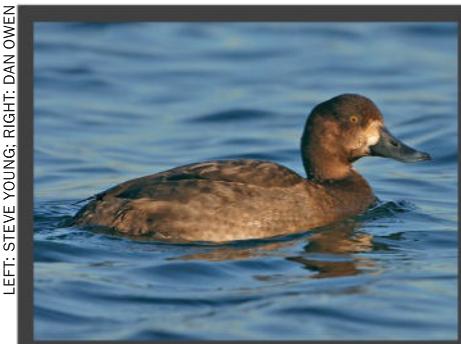
Drake Lesser Scaup is superficially similar to Greater Scaup but is smaller, shows a high head with a peak at the rear crown, and a more coarsely vermiculated body. Additionally, the head tends to show a purple sheen and the black at the bill tip is restricted to the nail.

some vermiculation. The pale facial blaze and ear coverts are prominent, and a pale foreneck can develop.

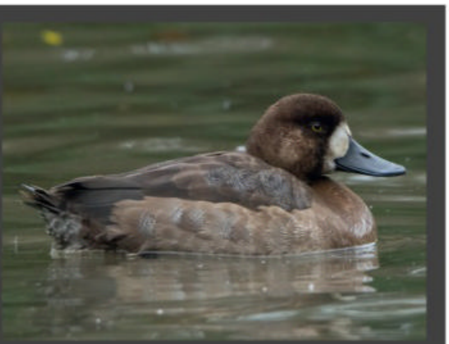
Full **juvenile** plumage is an uncommon sight in Britain. The overall appearance is a dull-brown bird with a limited blaze around the bill, as well as paler ear coverts and foreneck. Note that juvenile Tufted Duck may appear to show pale ear coverts, while female-types can also show a white blaze around the bill. The iris is a dull brown but begins to lighten as autumn progresses. If more than one juvenile scaup is present, structure may be used to sex the birds – young drakes often show a larger, darker head early on, while females usually appear slightly smaller and paler. Once moult has commenced, the scapulars should make sexing simple. Drakes will attain adult-type whitish-grey feathers with fine vermiculations. The scapulars of females will appear more of a duller mid-grey as in adult females. Again, these are vermiculated.

First-winters should remain ageable until the following spring and have a mixture of feathers. The rate and progression of moult varies between individuals. Typically, the belly and coverts are the last feathers to be moulted, while some individuals may retain a duller eye colour.

LEFT: STEVE YOUNG; RIGHT: DAN OWEN

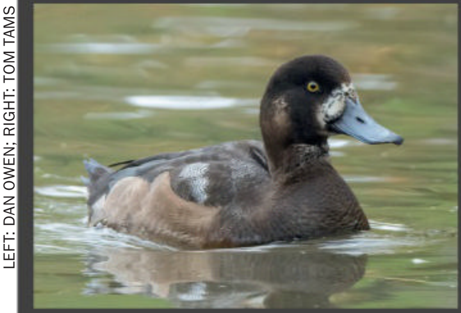


Fully juvenile Greater Scaup are not often seen in Britain. Note the uniform brown plumage with some paler feathering around the blaze, ear coverts and foreneck.

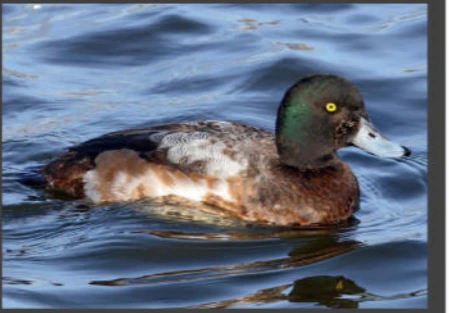


First-winter female Greater Scaup shows an extensive off-white blaze, but the plumage averages browner and 'dirtier' than adult females, and the eye is brown or dull ochre.

LEFT: DAN OWEN; RIGHT: TOM TAMS



This extensively brown first-winter Greater Scaup can be sexed as a drake by the eye colour (already quite yellow) and the emerging silvery adult-type mantle feathers.



This is a more 'obvious' first-winter drake Greater Scaup which already shows a green sheen to the head, a yellow eye and a greater extent of moulted scapular and flank feathers.

Geographical variation

There are two recognised subspecies of Greater Scaup – *marila* of northern Europe (including Iceland) to central Siberia, and *nearctica* of north-east Siberia and North America east to the Atlantic coast of Canada.

There is some contention over the taxonomic status of East Asian birds, which have been considered to belong to both subspecies. These birds' appearance is closer to *nearctica*, and they are the smallest of the three groups.

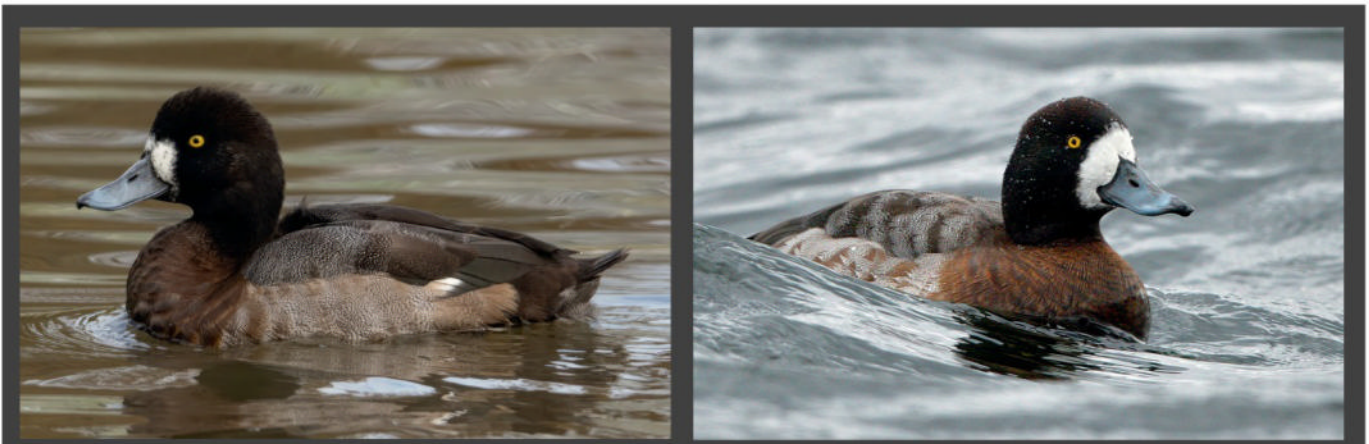
The head profile of *nearctica* differs in that the forehead appears to bulge, starting more vertical at the bill and forming a peak, sometimes followed by a 'hollow', or at least levelled off. This 'bump' may be observed when the bird is sleeping. In contrast, *marila* typically shows a smoother head profile with a more continuous curve. It is important to note that head profile changes with posture and behaviour, sometimes drastically so, meaning this feature should only be assessed when the bird is at rest.

Drake *nearctica* has more coarsely vermiculated upperparts, making its identification from Lesser Scaup a little more challenging than can be the case in Europe. In *nearctica*, the upperparts gradually darken towards the rear end, whereas there is a comparatively sharper cut-off between the scapulars and the tertials in *marila*.

The spread wing of *nearctica* is more reminiscent of Lesser Scaup, too, averaging less white extending into the primaries, though there is variation.

A European record of *nearctica* would be tough to prove and would ideally involve supporting DNA evidence. Away from the Azores, any touted bird would likely need to be an adult in fully moulted plumage to give an accurate assessment of the head profile. But, given the incidence of other Nearctic wildfowl reaching Europe, this subspecies must surely occur. There have been

LEFT: DAN OWEN; RIGHT: IAN CURRAN



Adult female Greater Scaup is quite variable in appearance, with the balance of grey and brown in the body varying between individuals. Furthermore, the white facial blaze can be fairly restricted (left bird) or very large, extending up the forehead towards the crown (right). However, note the bright yellow eye in both birds, which confirms their age as adult.

birds photographed in the Azores that certainly look the part, and perhaps the two juvenile Greater Scaup that turned up at Drift Reservoir, Cornwall, with the flock of 10 Lesser Scaup in October 2023 may have been identified as *nearctica* if they'd stuck around to moult – the circumstances certainly added up to them being of North American origin.

Lesser Scaup

In North America, Lesser Scaup is the more numerous of the two species. In Britain, however, it remains a rarity, with a long-term average of five records per year, these being assessed by the BBRC. Records are increasing, and recent years have seen the species arrive in higher-than-average numbers. Most birds arrive in autumn and go on to winter here, although there is often a small but noticeable spring passage, as well as the occasional summer occurrence (usually drakes).

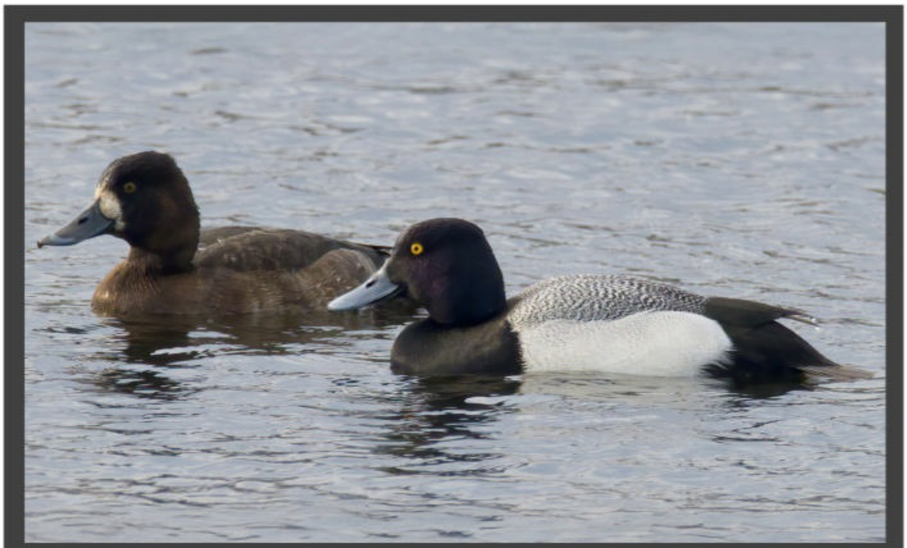
Lesser Scaup is often regarded as a freshwater species in North America, though will utilise saltwater too. Certainly, most British and Irish records come from freshwater bodies, though perhaps distance and other conditions may restrict the incidence of coastal records. The occasional saltwater sighting has occurred, with a drake at Loch Ryan, Dumfries and Galloway, in 2010, and a first-winter drake off Belfast Ferry Terminal in 2017 being examples. In both cases, the rarity was found among a flock of Greater Scaup.

Lesser Scaup is a smaller bird which looks a little more elegant. **Adult drakes** also have a dark head that shows a purple sheen in most lights, though this can unhelpfully appear to be tinged green on occasion. The iris is bright yellow. Both the breast and vent are black, sandwiching the grey mantle and flanks. Due to the coarser vermiculations, the mantle appears darker than in Greater Scaup. The flanks often look more sullied, too.

As with Greater Scaup, the eclipse plumage of Lesser Scaup isn't too striking. Overall, the bird becomes duller-looking with duskier flanks and mantle, and occasionally a small blaze appears around the bill. However, this shouldn't be confusable with a female plumage.

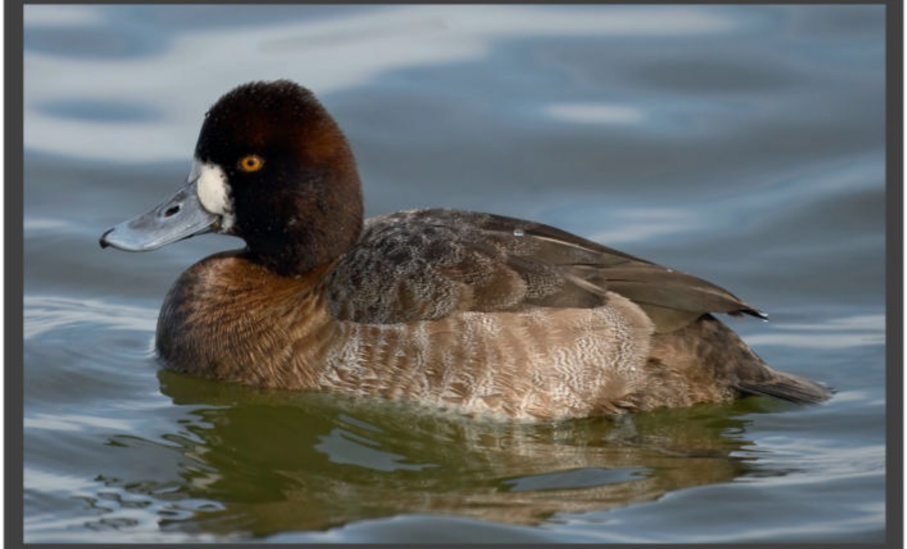
In **adult females**, the white facial blaze is often more restricted than in Greater Scaup, with a more curved profile, and typically pinches in at the bill's apex and mandible base. The iris is usually yellow, though female Lesser Scaup can retain a duller eye colour into adulthood. Overall, the plumage has broadly the same principle as Greater Scaup, with a brown head and breast, and a greyer-looking

CRAIG BELL



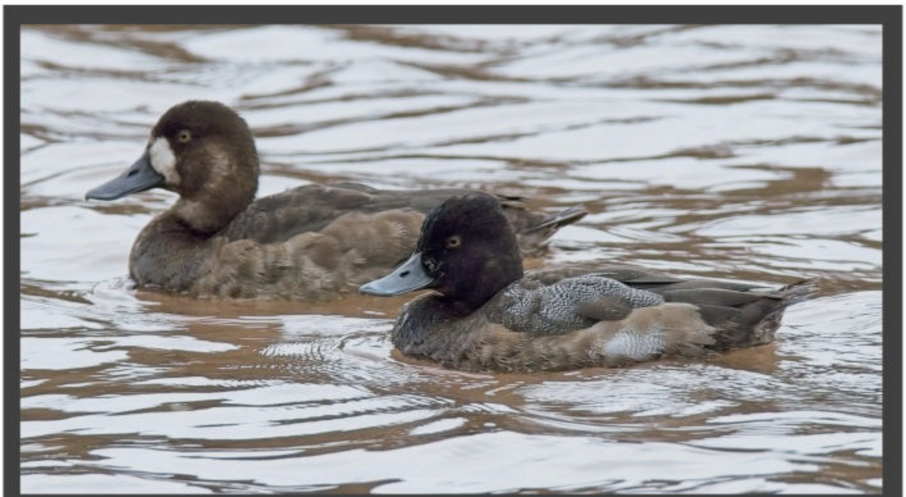
A pair of Lesser Scaup photographed in Lancashire in March 2024. Note the purple gloss on the drake's head, as well as the coarsely vermiculated upperparts. The female is brown and nondescript, but shows a white blaze and little contrast between the mantle and flanks.

LAURA WOLF

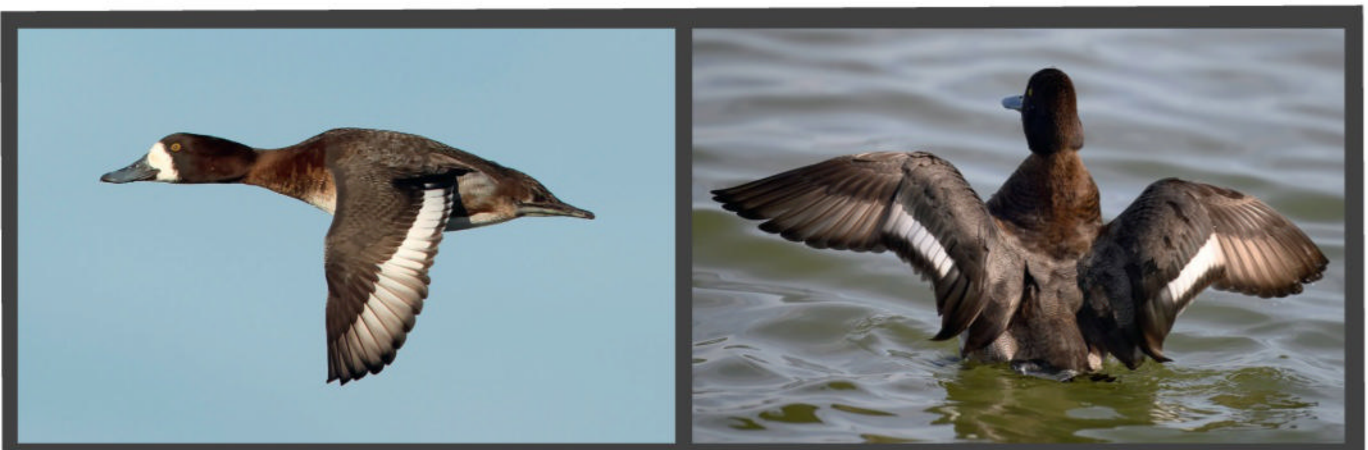


Adult female Lesser Scaup can be distinctive in its own right. This bird shows a plumage broadly very similar to that seen in Greater Scaup, with brown and vermiculated grey feathering mixed on the flanks and mantle. The eye is ochre-yellow and the blaze is a neat white. This individual demonstrates the classic Lesser Scaup head shape.

RICHARD STONIER



Taken in Pembrokeshire in December 2023, this image offers a size comparison between Lesser (front) and Greater Scaup. The Lesser shows extensively brown juvenile plumage, but is moulting in adult-like grey feathers on the flanks and upperparts, confirming it as a first-winter drake. The Greater is uniformly brown with an off-white blaze and a brown eye, making it a first-winter female. Autumn 2023 produced a major influx of Lesser Scaup in Britain and a small number of Greater Scaup arriving with them were suspected to be of North American origin.



LEFT: MATHIAS PUTZE (AGAMI.NL); RIGHT: LAURA WOLF

One key feature that separates the two scaup species is upperwing pattern. Greater Scaup (left) shows a pattern similar to Tufted Duck, with extensively white secondaries and inner primaries. Meanwhile, Lesser Scaup (left) shows a sharp divide between the white secondaries and grey primaries. But be careful when assessing this feature, especially from poor-quality or blurred photos which may show some distortion.

body. Some head and body feathers are replaced during spring, giving females an overall browner plumage.

The plumage development of Lesser Scaup during the **first year** is similar to that in Greater Scaup.

Which scaup?

Separation of Greater and Lesser Scaup is achieved based on several subtle features. Depending on what species are present for comparison, Greater Scaup is generally recognisable as a larger, heavier-looking bird. In comparison with Tufted Duck, most Greater appear larger with a big round head and chunky body. Meanwhile, Lesser Scaup would appear similar in size to, or usually smaller than, any Tufted Duck present, with a smaller head that is taller than it is long, peaking at the rear, often with a small bump or vestigial tuft. The body of Lesser is compact and the tail usually cocked. The head of a Lesser Scaup often forms a neat, vertical line with the hindneck, exaggerating the neck. It is important to note that head profile changes with posture and behaviour, sometimes drastically, so this should only be assessed when the bird is at rest. Additionally, when viewed head-on, Greater shows ‘swollen’ cheeks, while this is much less obvious in Lesser.

The bill of Greater Scaup is often more spatulate than that of Lesser, which is more parallel-sided. The nail also reflects this and is smaller and narrower in the latter species. In distant footage, any area of black showing at the bill tip should be limited in Lesser Scaup.

The upperwing is generally regarded as the clinching feature. There is a sharp divide between the white secondaries and grey primaries in Lesser Scaup, though some brighter adult drakes may show very limited white in the innermost primaries. In Greater Scaup, the pattern is similar to Tufted Duck, and the white continues towards the wing-tip. When assessing this feature on images, it should be stated that glare or blur can make a Lesser Scaup appear to have more extensive white than it actually does, but also contrast may be visible in Greater. Care should be taken when assessing this feature on anything other than pin-sharp shots taken at close range.

The underwing also differs between the two species. The underwing coverts are whiter in Greater Scaup, but white is restricted to the median and lower lesser coverts and axillaries in Lesser Scaup. This gives the latter species a more contrasting underwing.

Though this feature is far from conclusive and again subject to conditions, Lesser Scaup appear to sit higher in the water and may show a more angular back that peaks closer to the head. The back looks fairly rounded in Greater. Lesser Scaup also have more of a tendency to cock their tails (however, Greater will do this too!). Finally, Lesser Scaup has a longer tail, and at close range this feature may be appreciated. ■

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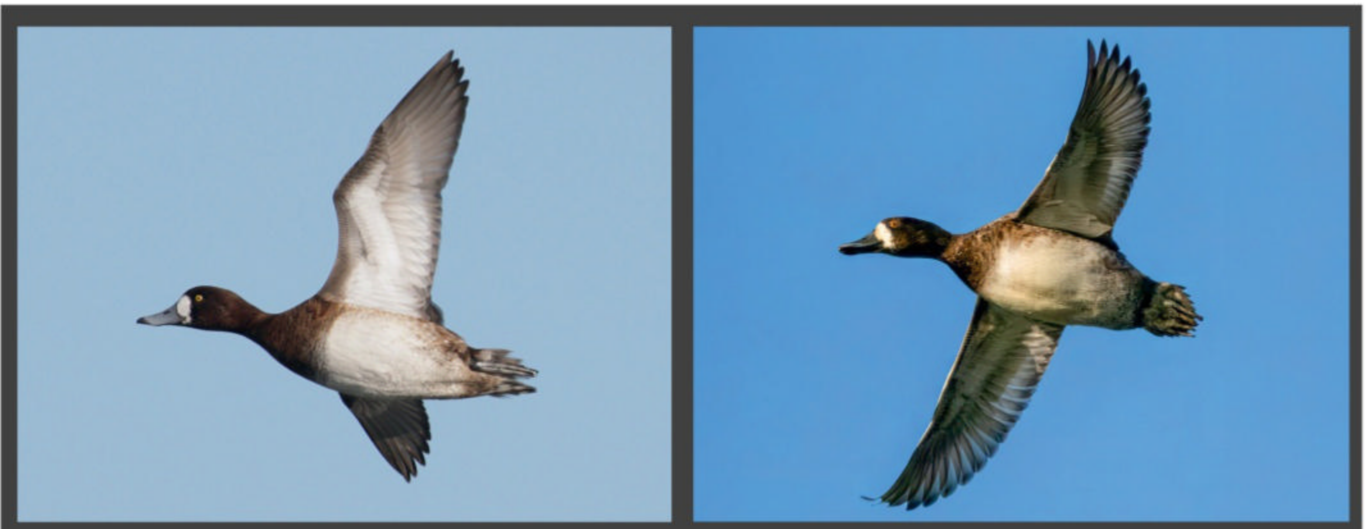

LEFT: MIKE DANZENBAKER (AGAMI.NL); RIGHT: SAM O'DONNELL

In addition to the underwing, Greater Scaup (left photo) shows a whiter underwing overall. In Lesser Scaup (right photo), the white is restricted to the median and lower lesser coverts and axillaries. As a result, this gives the latter species a more contrasting underwing.

Binoculars optional.
A hat, on the other hand, could come in handy.

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CANADA

Inside and outside the box

Birding could be a much less enticing prospect in British weather without access to hides. ***David Callahan*** investigates their history and uncovers some of the more unusual examples from Britain and around the world.

The wind is howling, blowing from the north, the drizzle relentless, but it doesn't matter – the weather has forced a small flock of waders to drop in, and there's a chance an errant seabird may also be blown onto the reserve. However, this weather plays havoc with your optics too, mist and beads of water block your view and the penetrating wind makes you shiver and shake as you focus and try to concentrate.

Fortunately, you're only 100 m from the nearest hide, which will allow ample views over the reserve's scrape, offer shelter from the wet and wind, and allow you to warm up. You can now scan the birds in comfort.

It wasn't always this way – birders in the past had to be made of sturdier stuff when pursuing their pastime. However, even then there were structures that enabled people to get closer to wildlife.

Hides made of hides

The origin of bird hides is nested in hunting culture and probably goes back to prehistoric times. Indigenous North American and Scandinavian people used shelters made of branches, reeds and osiers to conceal themselves, sometimes deploying the skins of their prey too. Such 'blinds' or hides allowed a patient, quiet and still hunter to get close to browsing mammals and birds. Stone structures and corrals were also used for similar purposes.

Such hiding places evolved into wooden platforms on stilts to give better views over habitat and camouflaged tents with space for one or two hunters. Some pioneering birders carried similar portable hides in the early 20th century, to compensate for their less powerful optics. The adaptation of military and hunting hardware for peaceful bird observation continues to this day, and is the origin of much outdoor clothing and optics.

Materials currently used for bird hides include stone (notably at Sheldrake Lake, New York, USA), bamboo (at Clyde Shepherd Nature Preserve, Georgia, USA), the now out-of-vogue portable camouflage netting, and other combinations such as abandoned stone crofts with pine panelling and a green roof (at Cottascarth RSPB, Orkney).

ROBIN CHITTENDEN

At nature reserves across Britain and beyond, hides are focal points for birders, typically offering close-range views of species and the opportunity to scan a large area of habitat. The Parrinder Hide at Titchwell Marsh RSPB on the North Norfolk coast is an especially popular example.

The mid-20th century saw a boom in the popularity of birding, which grew exponentially after the first RSPB reserve was established at Cheyne Court, on Kent's Romney Marsh. However, it was shortly after Minsmere RSPB, Suffolk, was established in 1947 that the organisation's first bird hides began to be built.

Constructive concealment

In 1975, the long-standing relationship between Gilleard Brothers and the RSPB began, and many readers will be familiar with the company's economically, if not ergonomically, designed pine bungalows present on many reserves.

The first of these were installed at Blacktoft Sands RSPB, East Yorkshire, after two birding brothers, Joe and Fred Gilleard, had spent much of their spare time trying to protect the area's Western Marsh Harriers from egg thieves. Being builders by trade, the Gilleard Bros (as they were then called) were in prime position to design and build hides when the reserve was being planned.

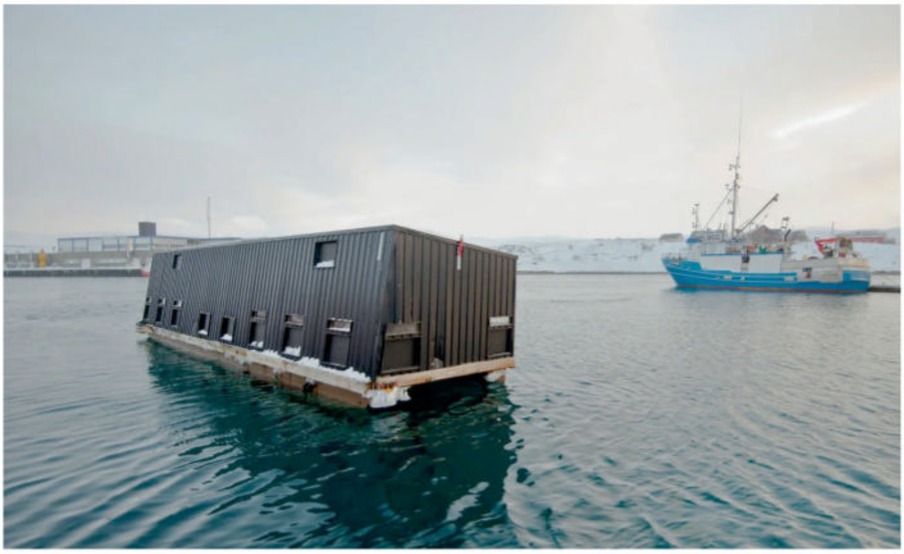
Since then, the family concern has continued through Joe's son Ron, and the company has now designed and built more than 800 hides, including more than 100 for the RSPB. The Gilleard Brothers are now the preferred providers of hides for various water companies, birdwatching societies, local authorities and privately run nature reserves They began exporting their designs in 1998, constructing two hides at Neerach Marsh for BirdLife Switzerland, along with another at Abu Dhabi, UAE, in 1999.

The now-traditional basic design originated by the Gilleards comprises a square or rectangular box made from pine with rudimentary bench seating and rectangular windows for viewing the surrounding habitat. There will often be a lathe door and wooden shutters over unglazed or plain glass windows. In many places, this prototype remains, unadorned except by a chart of likely birds on the wall behind.

The Gilleard Brothers' substantial market share has not kept their designs wholly conservative. Angled hides allowing a greater field of view are now built, typified by the Eric Morecambe Hide at Leighton Moss, Lancashire, featuring layered windows allowing those standing behind seated visitors to also scan the reserve. The front consists of octagonal blocks of wood. There are also treated timber open-backed hides, facing the prevailing wind, allowing observers to approach the viewing area without the squeaking and slamming of doors.

The market now sustains other specialist companies, the designs of which haven't wandered too far from that Gilleard prototype. The Wild Deck Company has provided larger hides with open vista views at Bowling Green Marsh, Devon, which are spacious and known for their comfort and integration into the surroundings, and an accessible hide at Pagham Harbour RSPB.

The huge hide-cum-visitor centre at the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's Potteric Carr nature reserve was built by Cleveland Sitesafe, and includes integrated energy efficiency and flood protection, plus substantial ceiling-high windows overlooking the reserve. The company now produces heavy-duty steel hides, painted green to blend into the vegetation. Of particular note are the company's innovatively angular hides at the Northumberland Wildlife Trust's East Chevington reserve, which were installed in 2024.


TORMOD AMUNDSEN

Biotope, an architectural practice based in Arctic Norway, is renowned for its quirky designs, including floating photography hides that allow birders to get up close to seaduck in Båtsfjord.

IAN ROBINSON

Hides can shield birders from the elements, which is especially useful when spending long periods in the field. Pictured here is the seawatching hide at Filey Brigg, North Yorkshire.

RSPB flagship reserves such as the former MOD shooting ranges of Rainham Marshes, Greater London, initially involved an element of environmentally conscious innovation. While they have now been usurped by more familiar wooden hides, the reserve used repurposed metal shipping containers when it first opened – cold and metallic, but robust when it came to the rain and wind. Other hides at Rainham include the Butts Hide, with a small disabled elevator, which allows panoramic views over the flooded grasslands of the reserve, and the space-age visitor centre itself overlooking the main scrape. Underlining that nowhere is safe, Rainham Marshes' robust metal fencing and the raised drawbridge of its visitor centre did not prevent the Butts Hide from having almost all of its huge windows smashed by vandals this summer.

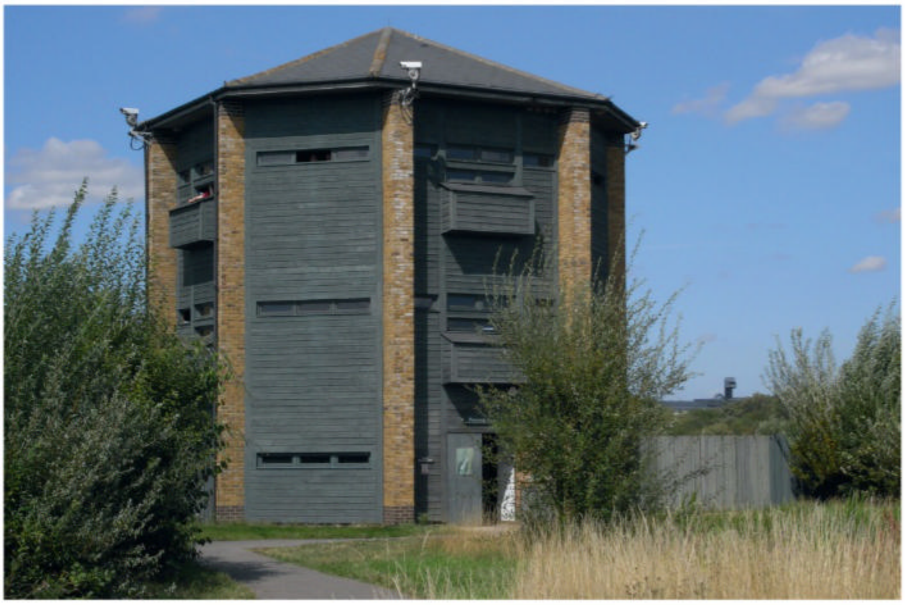
Window on the world

Outside the UK, companies worldwide have memorably digressed from the box-with-slots model. Norway's Biotope, founded by Hilsen Tormod Amundsen in 2009, laterally rethought bird-hide design, producing minimalist designs with open-sided angled walls to funnel the wind away from observers inside what looks like a deceptively exposed arrangement of walls. Birders are able to move around freely to change their angle of view, unseen by wildlife and sheltered from what can be a bracing wind that far north.

Frustrated and inspired by a lack of innovation Biotope has now set up 12 'meaningful' hides around the Varanger Fjord area, including a school shelter with an open fireplace, a concrete breakwater shelter on a rivermouth pier and several angular seawatching shelters. The company describes many of its unique shelters and hides as 'gazebos', somewhat underselling them but highlighting the conceptual differences from standard hides. They are intended to be used by the general public but certainly created with birders in mind.

Using the slogan 'Small buildings for big experiences', some of its 'mini-cabins' are set in very dramatic locations, allowing panoramic views of migrating wildfowl or breeding seabirds, and all allow room for scopes. Some larger constructions resemble brutalist architecture made of wood or concrete and most are suitable for two or more observers, with large panes of glass facing into the wind and aerating gaps away from it. They are designed to blend with the natural surroundings as much as possible, avoiding disturbance and hopefully adding to the human sense of appreciation.

At Grandefjæra, Biotope has built an Outdoor Amphitheatre (the 'Grande Amfi') for exhibitions and outdoor classrooms, with a tower for wildlife observation. This was its first 'birding-to-the-people' project and, unsurprisingly, the enterprising company is now expanding into building lodges and hotels – and a connection with nature is kept strongly in mind. Biotope's creativity has made birding hot-spots around Varanger more accessible to visitors without adversely affecting local wildlife.


VIA WIKIMEDIA

The Peacock Tower is the main hide at London Wetland Centre WWT, offering three storeys of panoramic views across the wetlands. The upper levels are accessible via a lift.

Towering achievements

A comparable idea to the Grandefjæra hide was created at the London Wetland Centre when it officially opened in 2000. Its Peacock Tower overlooks the main lagoons at one of the world's most urban wetland nature reserves. With access for all in mind, this three-storey hide even has an elevator. The WWT also has a tower hide at its Slimbridge headquarters.

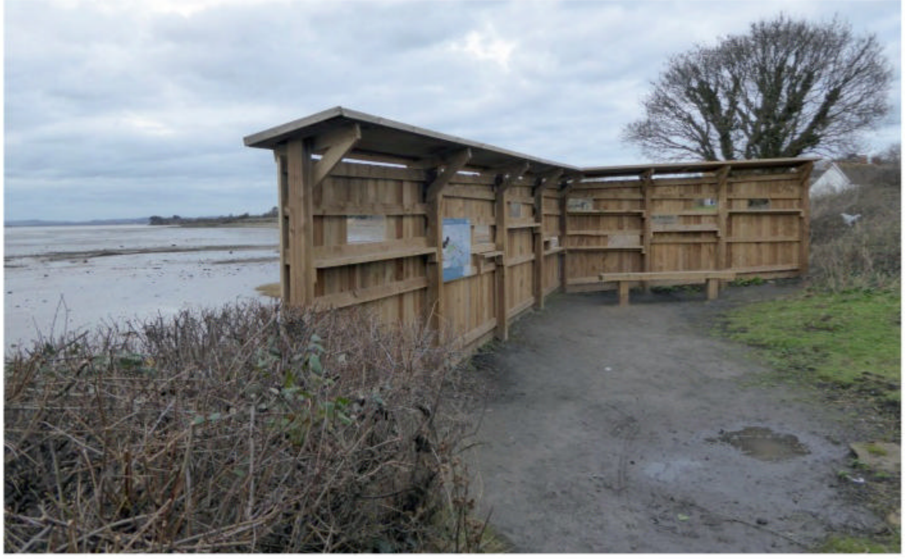
Other notable tower hides include one overlooking Dollard saltmarshes at De Kiekkaaste, the Netherlands, which, while four-legged, almost resembles an invading Martian Tripod from HG Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. Another tall, two-level tower at Ilmajoki, Finland, resembles an American frontier fort in its superficial ricketiness. At Lac du Der in France, visiting Common Cranes and White-tailed Eagles can be scanned from a wide, two-level tower hide platform on huge wooden pillars and covered in a tarred roof.

Martin Mere Wetland Centre in Lancashire has several intriguing designs. The United Utilities Hide provides panoramic views on two levels over rough grazing marshes, often packed with waders and wildfowl in winter. The Harrier Hide is more whimsical, with an entrance modelled on a Hen Harrier's tail feathers reaching dramatically above the door, and an approximation of its wings stretching either side to form the walls. However, Martin Mere's jewel in the crown in terms of infrastructure is the 70-m-long Swan Link Hide, a 'mega-hide' rebuilt in 2015 that provides widescreen views of Whooper Swans.

Almost suited to TV's *Grand Designs* is a hide on the bogs and marsh at Cors Caron, Tregaron, Wales. Part of a whole-site refit by architect Arwyn George, the hide features a curved, undulating roof over sturdy wooden piles with an enclosed viewing platform allowing about 270 degrees of observation through ceiling-high glass – all prefabricated from locally sourced materials. An observation tower has also been built there.

More imagination and multifunctional design has been involved as nature reserves become 'destinations' for the non-birding public. The Wildlife Discovery Centre at the Lee Valley Country Park, Essex, provides a modern two-tier hide, information/reception area and viewing tower, from which excellent views can be had in winter of some of the closest Eurasian Bitterns to central London. Designed by architectural partnership Perfect Circle, the warm, modern structure accommodates children and families while allowing quiet observation.

Westhay Moor on the Somerset Levels has an integrated two-floor tower hide standing on wooden piles in the mire – almost like a stilt house in a Vietnamese rice paddy. It is reached by a raised


DAVID SMITH

Sometimes a simple screen with slits can make a fine viewing space, offering both protection from the wind and rain and a discreet position where the birds can't see you. This particular structure is situated beside the Exe Estuary in Devon.

accessible boardwalk leading to an upstairs viewing gallery some 4.6 m above water level. Locally sourced timber rods are sunk 8 m deep into the mud below, resistant to rot and tying the hide into its environment. The cladding was chosen to be weathered by the sun, rain and wind, resulting in a building that blends in well with the surrounding marsh.

Open-plan observation

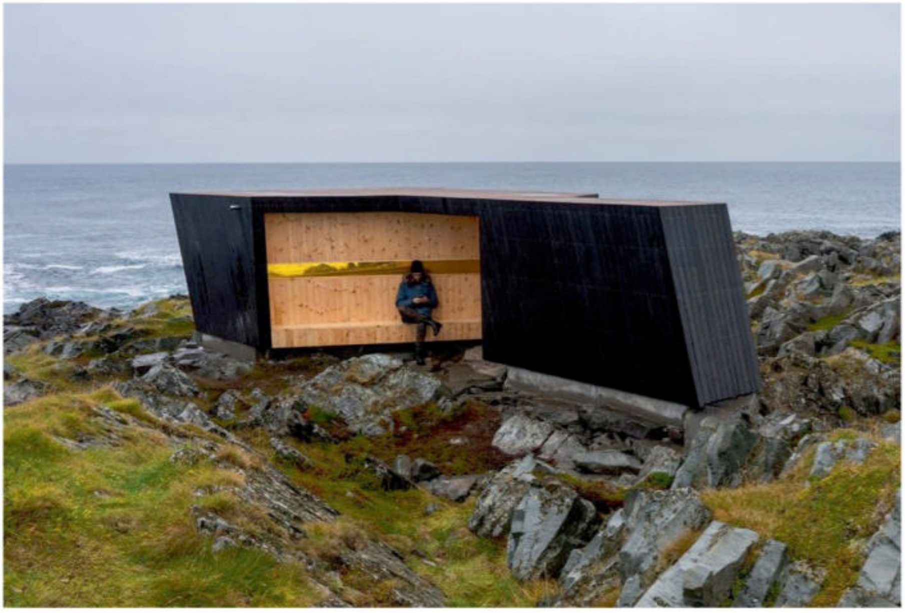
Not all hides are architectural projects. Some are mere screens or viewing platforms – but imagination can go into these designs too. Red Kite Design and Build Ltd was responsible for the viewing platform at the Common Starling murmuration site at Ham Wall RSPB, Somerset, using the swooping arcs of the birds as a template pattern for the platform's shape. A timber arch forms the large wooden shelter at Swell Wood, Somerset, enabling its large heronry to be watched in comfort. The shelter's open plan helps viewers to watch the canopy without intruding on the birds – and it has a living roof for further natural integration.

Steel hides – for example, at Marshside RSPB, Merseyside – are more imposing and intended to prevent vandalism and fire. This is useful in urban environments where not everyone has the interests of nature at heart. Birders who regularly visit public hides early or late in the day report couples making out, wild camping, barbecues, drug taking, drinking, teenage parties, superglued locks and hides being used as toilets.

A poster on BirdForum in 2022 had perhaps the wildest story from a hide:

"There was another chap already there, and after saying hello with no response we sat at the other end of the hide. After a while, my wife nudged me and whispered had I seen what the other chap was doing. I had a sneaky look to see that he had no binoculars, but a single shoe and sock draped across the arm-rest of the hide – and he was eating dog food straight out of a tin of Pedigree Chum with a spoon. We stayed quite a while in the hide, long enough to hear him scraping the dregs out of the bottom of the tin, before we left him to himself."

It seems little can be done security-wise to prevent such behaviour other than to appeal to the perpetrators' better natures. On the plus side, birders twitching rarities by public transport or bike later in the day have sometimes been glad of a hide's secondary use as an ad hoc hotel room when stuck in the middle of nowhere.


FRID JOREN STABELL

This eye-catching hide at Hamningberg, situated in the extreme north of Norway on the windswept Varanger coastline, is another example of Biotope's work.

Damaged hides sometimes cause less controversy than their removal. At Dungeness RSPB, three of the reserve's most well-loved hides – the Firth, Makepiece and Scott Hides, all overlooking Burrowes Pit by the visitor centre – were destroyed to be replaced by open viewpoints. The peninsula is often strafed by strong winds, making the decision – poorly explained by the RSPB – hard to comprehend.

Despite the many innovations in form, the contents of a hide often remain similar and familiar. We need stairs, a ramp or a door for access, benches, shelves for optics and elbows, walls and a roof as shelter and windows – preferably glazed and sealed – through which to see the birds. That much is unlikely to change, but the spaces in which these essentials are arranged will keep changing as designs evolve.

Birders are a pragmatic bunch – to them, a hide is solely a way of getting close to birds in enough comfort to avoid distraction. In that context, designers need not to stray too far from the basics. European bird hides tend to have the edge over American ones at present. The Stateside blog, *Powered By Birds*, perhaps says it best, when describing the sizeable Grauwe Gans (Greylag) Hide at Oostvaardersplassen in the Netherlands: "This little palace of birding is everything a bird blind should be, in my opinion: functional, comfortable and perfectly located to view birds."

This piece of birding real estate has a long fence leading to its door to minimise disturbance, hexagonal 360-degree viewing through rectangular slits with sturdy shelves underneath, and utilitarian flat wooden benches at an ergonomic height from the viewing position. ■

Reedbed hide
JAMES LOWEN

Some hides become famous for the quality of birds seen from them over the years. The Reedbed Hide at Frampton Marsh RSPB, Lincolnshire, is one such example, with Collared Pratincole, Stilt Sandpiper and Caspian Tern among the many rarities seen from there in recent times.

When Lesser became more

Last winter, birders on the Yorkshire and Norfolk coasts witnessed an unprecedented influx of Lesser White-fronted Geese from the reintroduced breeding population in Swedish Lapland. *Sarah Nordlinder* reveals the origins of these birds and how they found their way to England.

Some of the most rewarding moments for those of us working on conservation projects are when the birds take you completely by surprise. The first report of Lesser White-fronted Geese from the UK in autumn 2024 was certainly such a moment. On 9 November 2024, a flock of seven Lesser White-fronts was watched arriving in off the North Sea at Flamborough Head, East Yorkshire. Reports from observers revealed that the group consisted of four adults – likely two pairs – and three first-year birds. Since the male in one of the pairs had colour rings, it soon became clear that this flock involved birds from the population breeding in northern Sweden. The unringed birds, including the first-years, were all born wild in the same area – only released birds receive colour rings.

Earlier in the season, the brood with the ringed individual had been watched feeding on berries in high-altitude tundra close to the breeding site. From 5 October onwards the family had been reported from Oudeland van Strijen in the Netherlands, just south of Rotterdam and about 400 km south-east from the Yorkshire coast. This SPA is one of two regular wintering sites for the species in the Netherlands, holding up to about 70 individuals in recent years.

It is not fully clear what triggered the birds to cross to the UK, although there were reports of dense fog over the North Sea region around the time the flock arrived in Yorkshire. In previous years, there have been indications that such conditions may have initiated mass arrivals of Greater White-fronted Geese along the east coast of England, but whether this was the factor that triggered the arrival of the Lesser White-fronts remains uncertain.

A pair of Lesser White-fronted Geese at one of the most important spring staging sites in Sweden, Svartåmynningens Nature Reserve, situated halfway between Stockholm and Gothenburg.

NIKLAS LILJEBÄCK

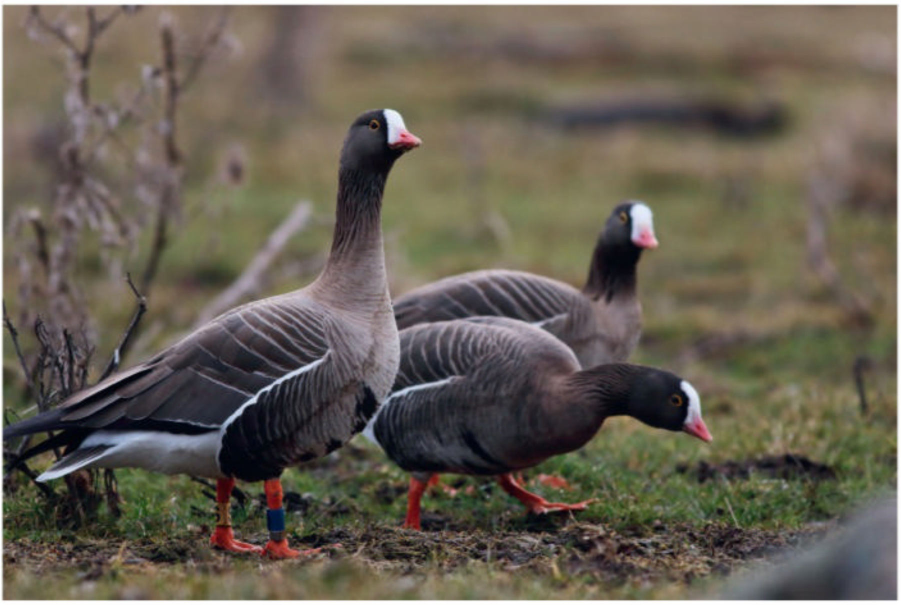
New arrivals

The Yorkshire flock lingered near Flamborough Head until 8 January 2025, and was subsequently seen further south along the Yorkshire coast at Kilnsea Wetlands and Spurn on 13 January. Remarkably, new arrivals of Lesser White-fronted Geese occurred in Norfolk during the course of January. The first flock of 24 was observed at Titchwell on 20th, moving on to Snettisham and Ken Hill on 21st and remaining there until 24 February. A second flock of nine was found in the area around Binham and Warham, and a third flock of seven was reported near Stiffkey on 25 February. Despite initial suspicions that some of these sightings may have involved the birds earlier seen in Yorkshire, identification of colour-ringed individuals confirmed that all four flocks actually contained completely different birds. Together, these flocks meant that a staggering total of 47 Lesser White-fronted Geese from the Swedish breeding population visited the UK in winter 2024-25. This represents about one third of the known population. Among these birds there were 31 adults and 16 young, from at least six known successful breeding pairs.

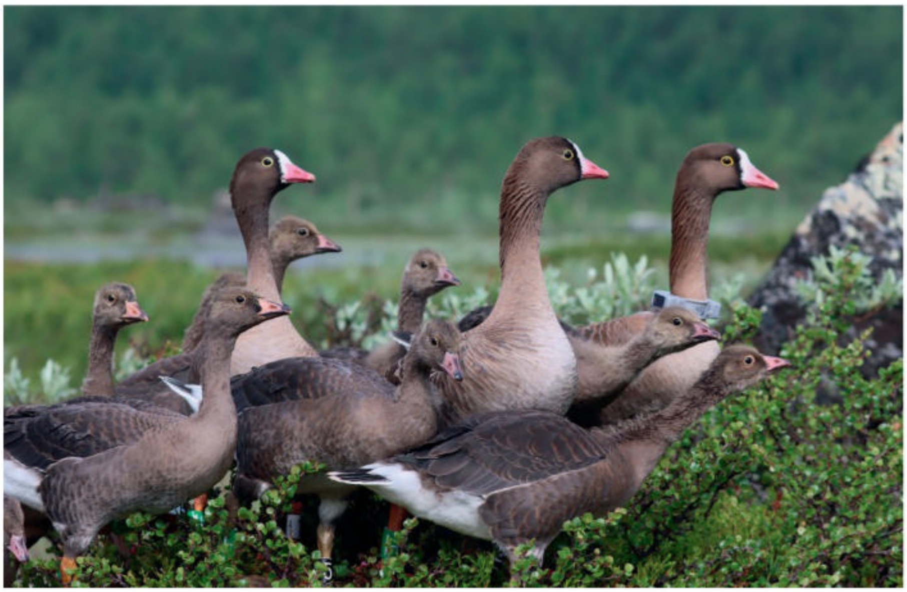
Tracking of ringed individuals revealed that the three Norfolk flocks likely originated from the Petten area, north of Amsterdam, which is the second important wintering site for the species in the Netherlands. It is unclear why the birds left this area and crossed the North Sea, and it is not known whether they did this as a single flock and then dispersed along the Norfolk coast, or if they moved in three independent flocks following the same route. While the Yorkshire birds were back at their Dutch wintering site on 27 January, none of the known Norfolk birds were reported in the Netherlands during late winter or early spring, suggesting that they may have moved from the UK directly to their spring staging sites in Denmark and Sweden. Several were found in late March and April at an important stop-over site near Linköping, Sweden, while others were seen in central and northern Sweden as they made their way north to the tundra.

NIKLAS LILJEBÄCK

The breeding grounds for Lesser White-fronted Geese in Sweden are characterised by Arctic tundra vegetation. These vast areas of wilderness are dotted with numerous lakes and streams.


NIKLAS LILJEBÄCK

Lesser White-fronted Geese, newly returned to Sweden in early April. Note the brown line on the belly of the front bird, which is caused by humus-coloured surface water foam that leaves a stain.

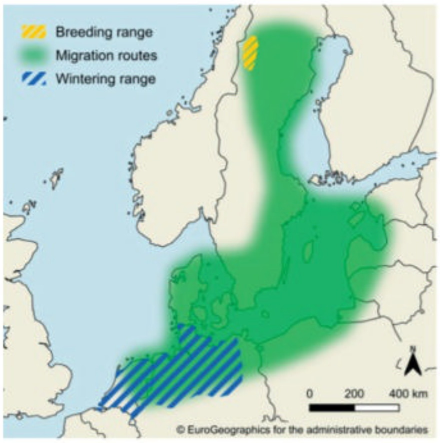

CHARLOTTE ZACKRISSON

A group of newly released Lesser White-fronted Geese. This includes a few yearlings that are always placed alongside the fledglings as they take on a supportive role for the young immediately after release. Note the GPS transmitter on the right-hand yearling.

A new wintering area?

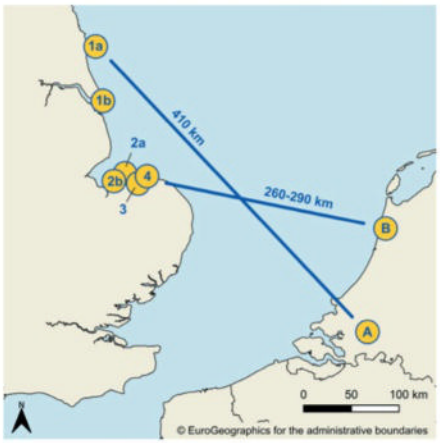
Reports of ringed Swedish Lesser White-fronted Geese in the UK during recent decades have almost exclusively concerned vagrants that have wandered during their first year after being released in northern Sweden. Otherwise, our tracking data suggests that birds have only touched down in the UK on one occasion; in late December 2014, a group of three released birds stayed for five days at Minsmere, Suffolk. After departing, the trio continued south and spent the rest of winter 2014-15 in Belgium. Established pairs have never been reported to cross the North Sea.

Therefore, the events of winter 2024-25 mark a significant departure from previous known movements of the Swedish population. Observations during this period indicate that at some stage these flocks left their two regular Dutch wintering sites and crossed the North Sea to remain in England for a prolonged period, departing between the end of January (the flock from Titchwell and Ken Hill) and the last week of March (the two smaller flocks). Several goose species have demonstrated a great deal of adaptability when it comes to changing their migratory and roosting behaviour and Lesser White-fronted Goose is no exception. As the Swedish population has increased, a new wintering site became established in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, from 2017-18 onwards and some birds are known to use the entire network of Dutch and German wintering sites before starting spring migration. In this context, the appearance of multiple flocks along the English east coast does not necessarily imply an exceptional event.



CHRISTINE KOWALLIK

The typical range of the Swedish population of Lesser White-fronted Goose.



CHRISTINE KOWALLIK

Movements to the UK observed during winter 2024-25. The two main wintering sites in the Netherlands are shown – Oudeland van Strijen (A) and Petten (B) – along with the presumed routes taken to sites in the UK based on the tracking of ringed birds.

KEES KOFFIJBERG

During spring migration, many Lesser White-fronted Geese can be observed strictly in pairs, allowing for accurate assessment of potential breeding partnerships.

Apart from adverse weather conditions, which may have displaced the first flock in November, it has been observed that at least the Strijen area is increasingly frequented by White-tailed Eagles (40 breeding pairs in the Netherlands in 2024, with an increased population during winter). These raptors are known to predate on Lesser White-fronted Geese during the breeding season and likely also at migration and wintering sites. Hence, a move by the geese to the UK could be some sort of escape strategy to minimise predation risk. Therefore, it will be interesting to see if the events of winter 2024-25 mark the start of a new wintering pattern or if they remain as an exceptional case.

Which category?

Any influx involving introduced birds causes debate among birders about how to categorise the records, and also their 'count-ability' for listing. Birders reporting the Swedish Lesser White-fronted Geese in the UK were no exception and many questions about the history of both the ringed and unringed birds were raised via online forums or in direct correspondence. On the other hand, for the conservationists involved in the releases to support threatened populations – as is the case for Lesser White-fronts in Sweden – such debates about categorisation may seem immaterial as all birds in the population, released or not, are deemed to be of great value in terms of ensuring the survival of the species. In the case of the Swedish breeding population, modelling studies have shown that in the longer term both annual survival and breeding success rates are currently insufficient to increase the population sufficiently to lift the species out of its endangered status.

Categorisation is up to national committees to decide, and it is not for conservationists or researchers to give advice. In the countries along the typical migration route of this population we find some variation regarding how the birds are treated, for example in some cases with no separation between released birds or wild-born individuals, or in others with specific labelling based on their origin as an introduced individual. However, a complicating factor in such decisions is that, contrary to common belief, more than half of the Swedish population is unringed nowadays, because they have been born in the wild, with either wild or (likely the majority, but not exclusively) released ancestry. In countries such as the Netherlands and Germany, regional phenology or behavioural patterns also point to the occurrence of individuals (often males) from, for example, the larger Russian breeding populations, which often associate with flocks of Greater White-fronted Geese and Tundra Bean Geese, making accurate categorisation even more troublesome.

The Swedish project

The first release of Lesser White-fronted Geese in Sweden took place in 1981, in an attempt to prevent the species from becoming extinct. During the early years of the project, native Lesser White-fronts were still breeding in the same region, but the degree to which released and wild birds paired and produced offspring is unknown. According to IUCN criteria, releases conducted when native individuals are still present in the area should be treated as a reinforcement or restocking programme and not as a reintroduction. But as we know, this is not always recognised in the sometimes heated debates about the status of the Swedish breeding birds. The first captive-breeding programme ended in 2000, following the indication of genetic introgression of other goose species in the breeding stock. It was resumed in 2010 with a different breeding stock originating from wild birds. A recent genetic screening of a subsample of birds has shown no evidence of introgression from other goose species in the current population, nor any indication that hybrid genes have historically influenced the gene pool of breeding populations in Sweden, Norway or Russia.

Both reinforcement programmes initiated a population recovery, and the entire Swedish population is today estimated to be 130-150 individuals. Especially the past four seasons have witnessed continuous good breeding results, leading to the large number of first-year birds as observed in the UK last winter.

MARK JOY

Lesser White-fronted Geese at Snettisham RSPB, Norfolk, in February 2025. This picture illustrates the unity of the family group of geese as they fly in.

Upland breeding sites

The core breeding area is relatively small and restricted to a few mountain valleys in Swedish Lapland, situated at altitudes from 600-800 m. The habitat consists of Arctic tundra vegetation with patches of mountain birch forest in wet depressions protected from the wind. There are many lakes and streams, while large areas are covered by mires and bogs. The area is known for hosting a wide variety of tundra specialists, such as Red-necked Phalarope, Long-tailed Skua, Gyr Falcon and Lapland Bunting. After the chick-rearing period, the geese move to high-mountain tundra to feed on berries.

During late summer and autumn they use several stop-over sites in central Sweden, such as Lake Hjälstaviken in Uppsala. By the end of September, the bulk of the birds start to arrive in the Netherlands. Part of the population winters in Germany, but wintering sites remain unknown for a considerable number of individuals. Identification issues, flocking behaviour with other geese, and also their preferred use of semi-natural feeding sites in more remote river valleys, may all considerably reduce the likelihood of detecting birds in the field.

During spring, part of the population migrates via Denmark and southern Sweden to the north, while others migrate along the southern Baltic coast. They then meet up in central and northern Sweden, before dispersing across the breeding area. Non-breeders and early failed breeders gather at a moulting site in Hudiksvall on the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia, where they are joined by the successful breeding pairs and their young in the second half of August.

NIKLAS LILJEBÄCK

Spring weather in the breeding area can vary greatly from year to year, and in some years, snow and ice may still be present well into midsummer.

NIKLAS LILJEBÄCK

Predation by White-tailed Eagles in the breeding area is a well-known issue and remains a difficult challenge.

Besides the impact of adverse weather conditions during breeding or chick-rearing, predation by White-tailed Eagle – a newcomer in the breeding area – and invasive American Mink has caused increased mortality in both adults and young and even led to a serious population crash in 2011-12. Staying to breed thus comes with an increased predation risk. In some years it has been observed that multiple experienced breeding pairs lost one or both partners due to predation. As with most goose species, Lesser White-front shows strong pair-bonding and breeding experience is a very important factor influencing breeding performance. Consequently, the loss of mature breeding individuals has a proportionally greater impact on species with long-term pair bonds compared to many other bird species.

High predation risk is also considered the main reason that the birds no longer moult in close proximity of the breeding area. Prior to spending about four weeks in wing moult when they are unable to fly, they instead move down the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia to moult with Greylag and Barnacle Geese in urban environments. ■

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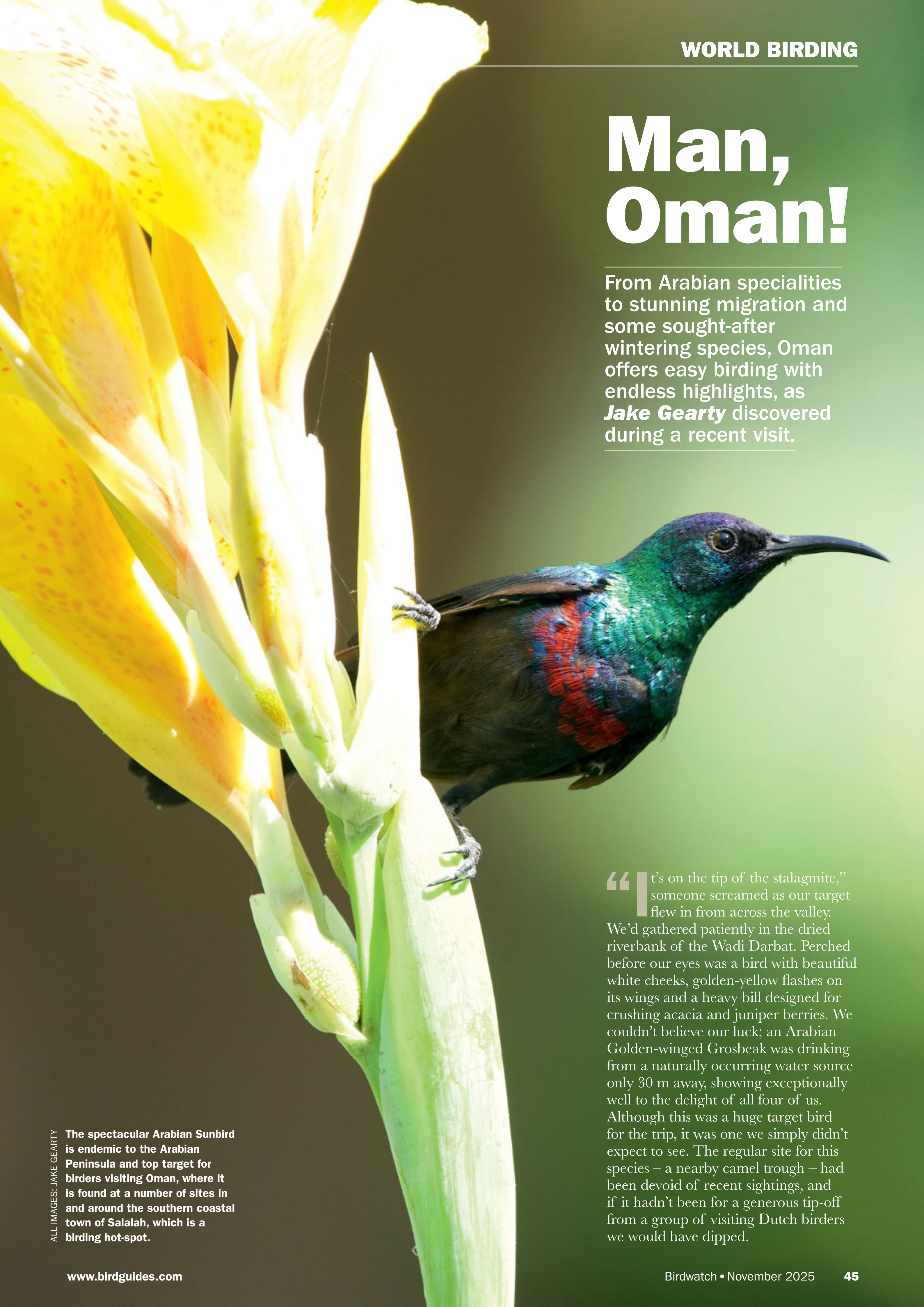


Man, Oman!

From Arabian specialities to stunning migration and some sought-after wintering species, Oman offers easy birding with endless highlights, as ***Jake Gearty*** discovered during a recent visit.

"It's on the tip of the stalagmite," someone screamed as our target flew in from across the valley. We'd gathered patiently in the dried riverbank of the Wadi Darbat. Perched before our eyes was a bird with beautiful white cheeks, golden-yellow flashes on its wings and a heavy bill designed for crushing acacia and juniper berries. We couldn't believe our luck; an Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak was drinking from a naturally occurring water source only 30 m away, showing exceptionally well to the delight of all four of us. Although this was a huge target bird for the trip, it was one we simply didn't expect to see. The regular site for this species – a nearby camel trough – had been devoid of recent sightings, and if it hadn't been for a generous tip-off from a group of visiting Dutch birders we would have dipped.

The spectacular Arabian Sunbird is endemic to the Arabian Peninsula and top target for birders visiting Oman, where it is found at a number of sites in and around the southern coastal town of Salalah, which is a birding hot-spot.

ALL IMAGES: JAKE GEARTY

The grosbeak is one of several sought-after species found in Oman. It also occurs in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, but these are less reliable for various reasons! It can be an exceptionally tricky species to catch up with and in Oman is usually only seen at a couple of spots where the birds come down to bathe and drink briefly before disappearing into the nearby juniper forests to crack into the fruit in search of seeds. This unexpected but highly valued encounter occurred midway through an already exquisite trip to a country that has so much to offer birders. A delightful mix of African and Asian species, as well as its own sprinkling of Middle Eastern treats, provides an excellent opportunity to see a fantastic array of birds in some truly spectacular and unique environments.

Tucked behind a beach, the reed-fringed lake at East Khwar is a popular birding site close to Salalah. Jake and his crew saw this Small Pratincole there – a southern Asian species that is a scarce non-breeding visitor to Oman.

The trip began with an eight-hour overnight flight from Heathrow to Muscat, with field guides in hand, pins saved on Google Maps, trip reports milked and eBird ready and waiting. Our first stop, at Qurum Beach and Wadi Adai, provided us all with an excellent opportunity to add our first lifers of the trip. Sooty Gulls covered the nearby beaches, providing an attraction for even the biggest larophobes among the group. Waders gathered on the estuary included Tibetan and Greater Sand Plovers standing out among more familiar species such as Curlew Sandpiper and Greenshank. Brown-necked Raven called overhead while Delicate Prinia sang from the nearby scrub. Purple Sunbirds buzzed overhead and a covey of Grey Francolin crept across the edge of the reserve. The species were racking up, and morale was high. We continued to nearby Al-Qurum Park, which is a must-visit site for familiarising yourself with what Oman can offer. The park is beautiful and offers perfect habitat for resident and migrant birds; Purple Sunbirds showed exceptionally well while nectaring on flowers, and while Indian Roller can be found anywhere across the park, one bird had a particular liking for the children’s play area! Arabian Green Bee-eater can be found feeding on insects around the outskirts of the park, and with luck you might bump into something rarer – in our case it was a European Bee-eater, which can be quite scarce in Oman.

Another Arabian endemic is the impressive Arabian Eagle-Owl, a species known chiefly from coastal areas and slightly inland, seemingly avoiding the most barren of the region’s desert interior. A well-known site is Ain Razat Park, situated north-east of Salalah.

No birding trip is complete without visiting either a sewage works or a rubbish dump, and fortunately Oman offers both. The nearby Al Mutaqa waste-disposal site offers a chance to see hundreds of raptors and vultures. Park sensibly and away from this very active site and you will find the sky and nearby landscape covered by Eastern Imperial, Steppe and Greater Spotted Eagles, as well as hundreds of Egyptian Vultures. If you’re lucky you may see Lappet-faced Vulture – this Endangered species can be found across Africa but also resides in the Al Hajar Mountains around Muscat, making it another target for visiting birders.

No trip is to Oman is complete without hiring a boat and visiting the gorgeous Fahal Island. Large groups of Red-necked Phalaropes were encountered on the journey as they headed south for the winter. Our main goal, however, was close views of breeding Sooty Falcons, which hunt around the cliff tops and edges. Timing is key for this raptor, as the earlier in the autumn you visit the better your chances of success. Checking eBird is highly recommended! This species breeds exclusively on a few islands around the coast of Oman, timing its breeding season to coincide with the migration of smaller birds returning south for the winter. The island also provides a great opportunity to see Red-billed Tropicbird up close; this species also breeds here, but sensibly waits until the falcons have left for the winter.

An excellent final stop before heading south is Sahil Creek, which is an important site for wintering Pallas's Gull. The single bird we found roosting in a large group of gulls turned out to be Oman's first returning individual of the winter; however, hundreds can be found here later in the season. The area is also excellent for waders and provided us with our first Terek Sandpiper.

The exquisite African Paradise Flycatcher is one of several predominantly Afrotropical species which extend their ranges into southern Arabia and occur around Salalah. Other such birds include Bruce's Green Pigeon, Diederik and Jacobin Cuckoos, Black-crowned Tchagra and Rüppell's Weaver.

Al Hajar Mountains

A vital part of any trip to Oman is a visit to the breathtaking Al Hajar Mountains. Birds aside, the scenery is stunning. Wadi al Muaydin is a must-visit site, with the steep-sided valley, scattered trees and shrubs offering protection for resident species and migrants heading south. Plain Leaf Warbler is a key target here, while species such as Eastern Orphean and Menetries's Warblers can be found skulking in the bushes, and nearby open ground could produce Desert, Hume's and Red-tailed Wheatears. The steep, long and winding drive up towards Jebel al Akhdar offers impressive views and excellent opportunities to see Arabian Babbler, Streaked Scrub Warbler, Lappet-faced Vulture, Sand Partridge and all the possible wheatear and shrike species. Qaryah House in the nearby village of Saiq does an excellent shakshuka that shouldn't be missed!

Wader spectacle

It's quite a slog down to Salalah from Muscat, but fortunately there are a few excellent birding opportunities to break up the journey. The first is the stretch of coastline between Filim and Shannah port, which provides vital feeding areas for millions of waders, including the much sought-after Crab-plover. The importance of having a scope and checking tide times is crucial here, unless you enjoy your waders as distant, shimmery specks. The nearby mangroves and scrub can provide an excellent distraction from the waders, with possible species including Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Clamorous Reed Warbler, Indian Silverbill, Indian White-eye, Isabelline Shrike and, if you're lucky, Collared Kingfisher. A small population of this kingfisher can be found in the mangroves around Filim, and although the species is widespread throughout Asia some suggest this form may be a potential future split. If time allows, a day or two on Masirah Island should provide a great opportunity to see Crab-plovers up close as they roost on the shorelines. Hilf Sewage Works and the nearby park are worth a visit – over the years they have produced some exceptionally rare species, including Forest Wagtail, Common Hawk-Cuckoo, Black Drongo and Lesser Moorhen.

Indian Roller is widespread throughout its range across the Arabian Peninsula and Indian Subcontinent. In Oman it is frequently seen perched on roadside trees and wires, thriving in even human-altered environments. Its diet consists primarily of insects, with a preference for beetles.

Oases and a long drive

The drive to Salalah is dull at times, so ensure you're either with good company or have excellent music taste – luckily I had both. Species are few and far between, and there isn't much interest aside from occasionally having to swerve to avoid camels crossing the road. A couple of good rest stops at Al Ghaftayn Resthouse and Qatbit Motel provide crucial breaks for food and accommodation, and can also help to pad out the list. Birding can be good, especially for migratory warblers, with Wood, Menetries's and Asian Desert Warbler all regularly recorded. Nearby Muntasar Oasis is a must-visit site in the evening for Egyptian Nightjar, as well as being another excellent spot for migrants – a personal highlight for me was an exceptionally showy Olive-backed Pipit. The area around Shisr fields and Al Beed Farms cannot be missed as it's a key site for Sociable Lapwing. This Critically Endangered wader winters in small numbers around the irrigated fields, often socialising with White-tailed Lapwing and other shorebirds such as Wood Sandpiper. The area is also great for desert species, including Greater Short-toed, Desert and Crested Larks and the gorgeous Greater Hoopoe-Lark.

The town of Mudayy provides a really good opportunity to see Grey Hypocolius. It feeds mostly on palm dates from nearby trees and can be shy at times, but it is well worth the wait! This species is in a family all on its own, with its nearest relatives being the waxwings. The birding around this area can be brilliant, with Blackstart, Nile Valley Sunbird, Striolated Bunting, Bluethroat, Pale Crag Martin and flocks of Crowned and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse flying over to keep you busy if you need to wait for the hypocolius to perform.

Grey Hypocolius is the sole member of the Hypocoliidae family and a top target for birders visiting its restricted range in the Middle East and western India. In Oman, the town of Mudayy, situated near the Yemen border, is currently the most reliable winter site for the species.

Salalah area

Birding around Salalah is hugely enjoyable and it's an area I would love to return to. The coastal sites of Khawr Raysut, West Khawr and East Khawr all provide excellent opportunities to see large numbers of birds up close and often in beautiful light. Big flocks of waders, gulls and ducks gather here to feed and roost. There is chance of encountering scarcer species such as Small Pratincole, Caspian Plover, African Sacred Ibis and Broad-billed Sandpiper, or if you're really lucky a major rarity such as Knob-billed Duck.

Away from the coast, the parks of Ayn Hamran and Ayn Razat provide food, water and protection for a number of interesting species. African Paradise Flycatchers, with their chestnut plumage and bluish crest, can often be found perching among the trees and bushes; their elegant tail feathers can sometimes reach 20 cm in length. Other species regularly found in the area include Black-crowned Tchagra, Arabian Warbler, Bruce's Green Pigeon, Arabian Eagle-Owl, Arabian Scops Owl, Bonelli's Eagle, Long-billed Pipit and Arabian Sunbird.

One location that simply can't be missed is Jabal Samhan. Dubbed the 'edge of the world', the views alone make a visit worthwhile, but a contender for bird of the trip is often seen here – Verreaux's Eagle. This massive raptor is incredibly distinctive in flight thanks to its dark plumage and distinguishing white markings on its back. The species feeds almost exclusively on the Rock Hyraxes found in this area. From the viewpoint, a brilliant supporting cast includes Peregrine Falcon, Crested Honey Buzzard, Long-legged Buzzard, Greater Spotted, Steppe, Bonelli's, Booted and Short-toed Snake Eagles, and Griffon Vulture. The journey back towards Salalah can coincide with a quick trip to the nearby Tawi Atayr sinkhole for Yemen Serin – a bird that couldn't be any further from Verreaux's Eagle in terms of excitement!

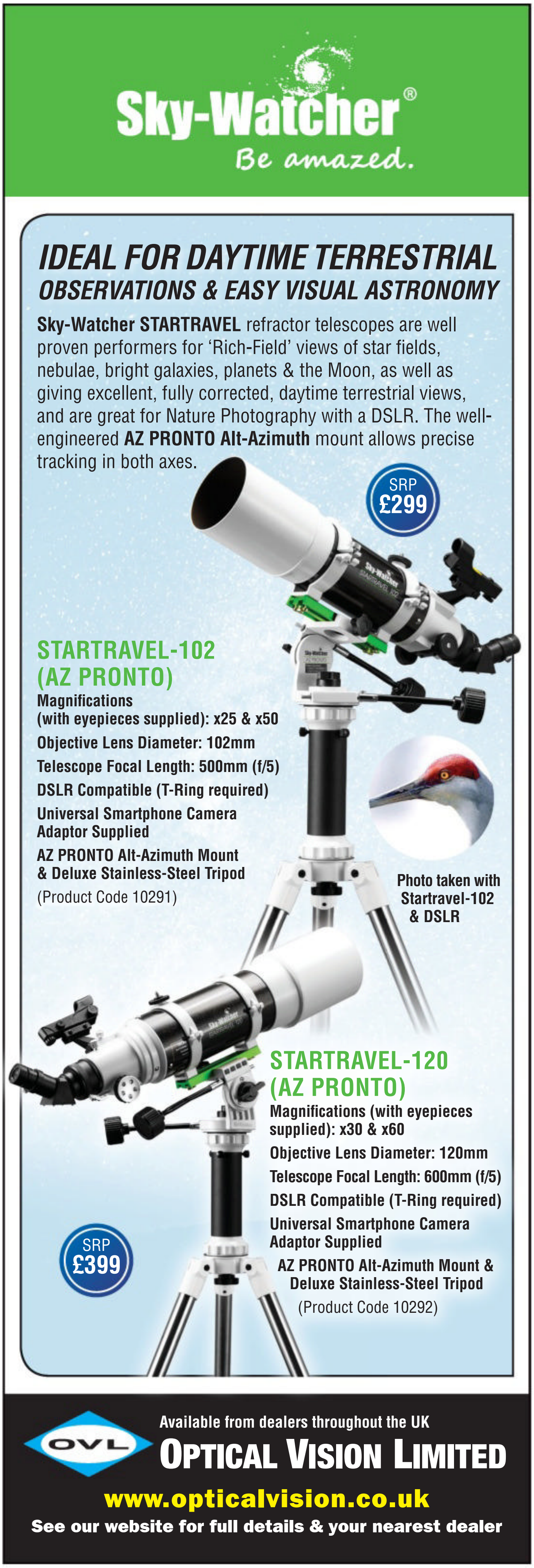
No birding trip to Salalah is complete without a pelagic from Mirbat. Pray for good winds and that the conditions are not too choppy. Jouanin's Petrel, Persian Shearwater, Swinhoe's Storm Petrel, Bridled Tern, Socotra Cormorant, White-cheeked Tern, Saunders's Tern and Masked Booby are all regularly recorded. The harbour itself provides a great opportunity to see Abdim's Stork up close and personal, while a stop at Taqah cliffs offers a chance to view the breeding colony of Forbes-Watson's Swifts.

In short, Oman is a must-visit destination for all world birders. The birding is fairly easy, and the quality of species found across the country is simply sensational. ■

A Mirbat pelagic is a key part of any Oman trip, offering a chance to see the rare Jouanin's Petrel, as well as Flesh-footed Shearwater and good numbers of Red-necked Phalarope (pictured).

Logistics

SIM cards are available at the airport and having data is hugely important. It's worth remembering that some hotels (Thumrait, for example) are only contactable via WhatsApp. A 4x4 is an absolute must for a couple of key species; you simply will not make it up the wadis in a regular car, while the police in some parts of the Al Hajar Mountains will block you from getting up to the higher points without a 4x4. Otherwise, basically all key sites are available on eBird, but if the habitat looks good it's almost definitely worth checking, especially if visiting during migration times. *Birds of the Middle East* is a very useful book that includes most of the birds found in Oman, while the *Collins Bird Guide* also covers the majority of species.



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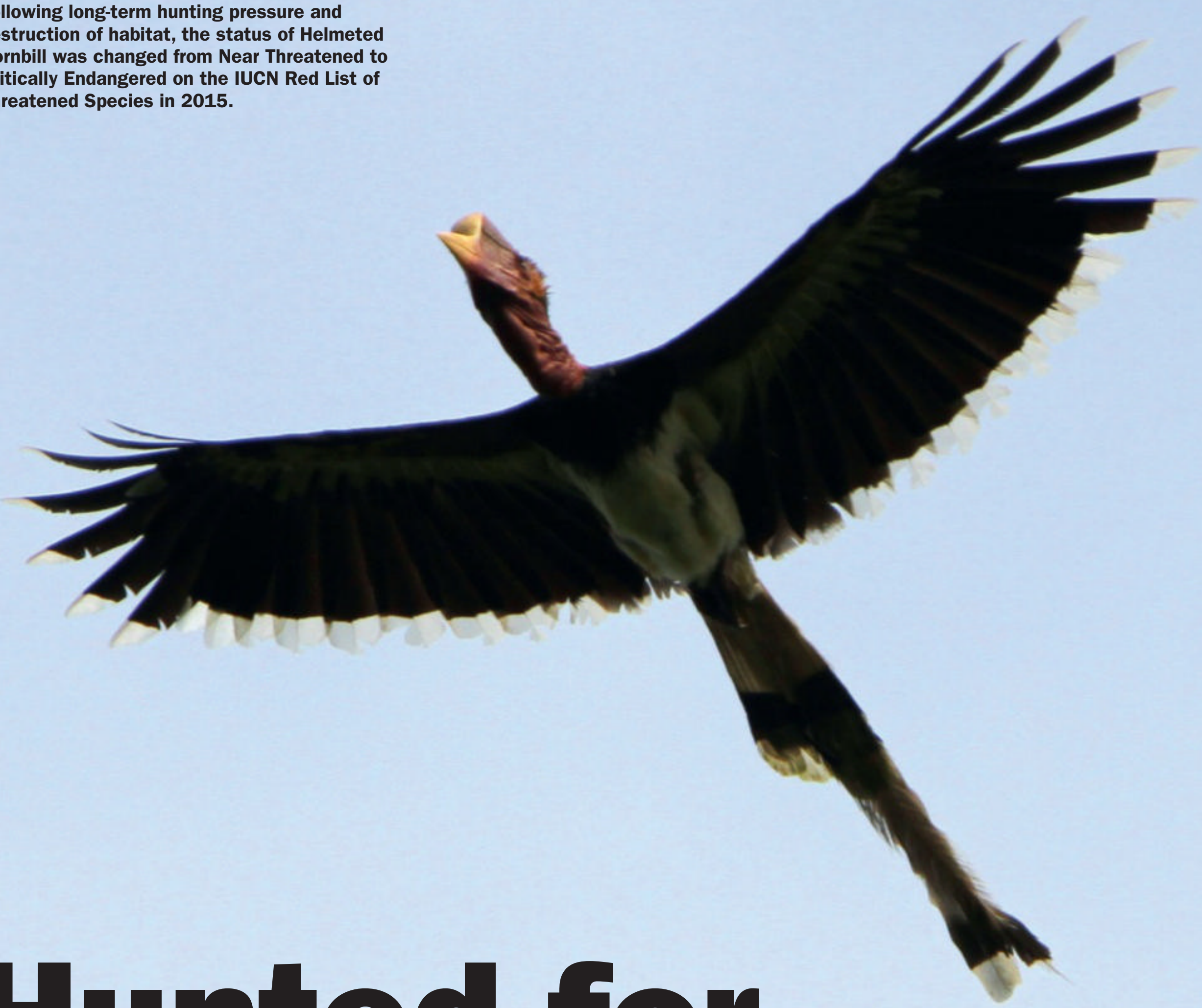

Following long-term hunting pressure and destruction of habitat, the status of Helmeted Hornbill was changed from Near Threatened to Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species in 2015.

JAMES EATON (AGAMI.NL)

Hunted for its ivory

A recent encounter with the Critically Endangered Helmeted Hornbill has left ***Paul Jepson*** wondering how enterprise, art and innovation could save the species.

Evolution has produced some truly extraordinary birds. One of my all-time favourites is a species I first got to know as a young backpacker exploring Thailand and Malaysia: Helmeted Hornbill. This bird combines size with a blocky casque, a slightly grotesque, turkey-like neck, a long tail and a crazy call. This starts with slow, knocking sounds and builds into a manic, laughter-like crescendo that fills the forest.

During the two decades I spent travelling and working in Indonesia and elsewhere in South-East Asia, I never worried too much about its future. I assumed the rainforest we were working to protect would secure its survival.

Then, in 2015, I learnt about a sudden surge in hunting Helmeted Hornbill for its casque ‘ivory’. From 1991-98, I’d worked with the Indonesian conservation authorities on tackling the parrot trade, and between 2000 and 2008, I’d led research projects on the songbird trade in Indonesia. I understood how the bird trade worked, as well as the power and reach of the syndicates behind it. When I learned of this new threat, I became deeply pessimistic. With the bird’s large size, low densities and extremely slow breeding rate, I couldn’t see how it could sustain targeted harvesting.

Into the field

In autumn 2024, I was invited to share ideas with a project team working to transform an oil-palm plantation compensation forest into a community asset for nature-based enterprises. My old Indonesian friend and colleague, who leads the project, enthusiastically told me that the forest still supported all 10 species of Bornean hornbills. During my orientation day, I encountered three of these: Oriental Pied and Black Hornbills near the village, and Rhinoceros Hornbill nearby. However, it was clear that to reconnect with Helmeted Hornbill I would need to venture deeper into the forest.

A few days later, I was trekking up a disused logging road with Anto, an ex-Dyak blowpipe hunter. Along the way, he launched into an impressive rendition of Helmeted Hornbill's call. This failed to elicit a response, but it became clear that Anto had exceptionally sharp eyesight and a remarkable knowledge of bird calls. I asked him about his background, and he shared how, as a boy, he had learned to identify bird calls from his father during their hunting expeditions. He told how he had given up his blowpipe in favour of a gun, but now he just enjoyed learning about the birds in his role with the monitoring team.

A brief encounter

It wasn't until the last morning that we finally heard the distant call of a Helmeted Hornbill. As we walked, Anto occasionally stopped, unsheathed his knife, tapped it against a tree and uttered his Helmeted Hornbill calling card. Whether in response or by coincidence, we eventually heard a call some distance ahead along the river. We quickened our pace.

When we reached the edge of a river, the hornbills seemed to have gone quiet, and I feared we had flushed them. But after a series of periodic calls from Anto, one finally responded. It was somewhere in a giant tree across the river, but the angle made it difficult to see. I scanned every visible branch with no luck. Another 20 minutes passed, and then, suddenly, there was a swoosh of massive wings. Three birds burst out of the canopy, giving fleeting but unmistakable views of long tails and strangely shaped heads before disappearing.

I was elated – they hadn't all gone. Somehow, Helmeted Hornbill was still hanging on in this pocket of forest that has been spared from conversion to oil-palm plantations.

Significant sighting

I checked eBird for Helmeted Hornbill records from the last 10 years to understand the species' recent presence. As a sensitive species locations are not revealed, but the map showed only 10 or so 50-km squares in Indonesian Kalimantan where the species had been recorded. Kalimantan has an estimated 1.98 million sq km of natural forest, and our observation meant that only 1.39% of this has produced records of Helmeted Hornbill. The trade in Helmeted Hornbill ivory seems to have abated, but it's unclear whether this reflects reduced demand or the dwindling, remote populations making hunting no longer viable.

Back home in Edinburgh, I reached out to members of the IUCN Helmeted Hornbill Specialist Group, who had published the *Helmeted Hornbill Status Review, Range-Wide Conservation Strategy, and Action Plan (2018-27)*. It became evident that the plan had failed to mobilise much action, and Helmeted Hornbill has largely been left to fend for itself.

This lack of progress did not surprise me. In the 1990s, the prevailing logic for bird conservation was to become more systematic: working with governments to create international regulatory frameworks and providing standardised evidence to enable their implementation. This approach made sense, but it resulted in a shift towards desk-based conservation, with NGOs focusing on policy and data. This has led to what can be described as 'bureaucratic capture', where conservation efforts align with the simplified, linear theories of change favoured by international development agencies, characterised by time-limited, project-based funding. Unfortunately, this approach has often come at the expense of the grounded passion and energy of field professionals.

In some regions of the world, notably South America and parts of Africa, the shift away from grounded NGO action has been offset by the rise of birding ecotourism. This has fostered local conservation commitment and ensured that key natural areas are regularly visited and monitored. However, many regions of South-East Asia are distant from wealthy birder populations, and there are few expatriate entrepreneurs with the networks to tap into international tourism markets. As a result, this complementary mechanism has not developed and species with a black-market value, such as Helmeted Hornbill, are left perilously exposed.

PAUL JEPSON

Oil-palm plantations negatively impact Helmeted Hornbills by destroying their native forest habitat, eliminating large nesting trees and food sources. This deforestation also makes the remaining forest patches more accessible to poachers, who hunt the birds for their casques.

Enterprise conservation

In the 1980s, a generation of overseas-educated Indonesians returned home, bringing with them a growing concern for the environment. Some joined government, while others formed NGOs. After the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, international conservation NGOs created opportunities for young Indonesian graduates to contribute to biodiversity goals. However, these graduates sought to forge an Indonesian approach to conservation – blending traditional values of consensus and community with pragmatic economic realities and a desire to protect their unique ecosystems. Some launched specialist NGOs or consultancies to integrate sustainability into Indonesia's plantation and mining industries.

By the late 1990s, most of Indonesia's forests had been logged and vast areas were being converted to palm-oil plantations. With markets for sustainable products on the rise, a coalition of palm-oil companies and NGOs founded the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). RSPO members committed to sparing High Conservation Value Forests (HCVFs) within their plantations. Some plantations either joined the RSPO too late or lacked adequate internal procedures to protect HCVFs. To address this, the RSPO introduced a policy allowing companies to offset past mistakes by identifying at-risk forests and funding community-based projects to ensure their survival for 25 years.

PAUL JEPSON

Anto was able to perform a good impression of Helmeted Hornbill's call. During their time together, Anto told Paul that he learned to identify bird sounds from his father during hunting expeditions.

This brought me to Kalimantan, where my friend's consultancy, Aksenta, has long worked on HCVF assessments and biodiversity planning for palm-oil companies. Now, with plantation expansion slowing, their focus has shifted to transforming surviving forest areas into community assets that generate economic and cultural value. In the area I visited, the team is working with community members to develop village nurseries that grow tree seedlings collected from the forest for mining restoration, artisanal enterprises based on Dayak forest knowledge and a nature park with outdoor activities. This approach mirrors the European rewilding movement, where healthy ecosystems support viable businesses. Success depends on building networks of entrepreneurs and conservationists who can make nature conservation a sustainable business model.

Thinking creatively

This is all promising, but these enterprises could succeed with or without the continued presence of Helmeted Hornbill. Once hunted, the bird had clear monetary value in artisan markets. Is there a way to turn the living bird into a value-generating asset for the village forest enterprises? To help crystallise my thinking on this question, I visited the bird collection at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh to sit quietly and examine hornbill specimens.

I held a head and casque in my hand, imagining a master artisan studying it, gently pressing it to assess its texture and density – Helmeted Hornbill is the only species with a solid casque. I thought of a gem-maker's focus on the interface between the casque's yellow frontal shield and red sides, where the material could be worked into a 'stone' of unique beauty. I envisioned an artist captivated by the shape and texture of the casque, planning how to carve it into an intricately integrated motif.

In Chinese culture, these creations are part of a tradition called wenwan – a hobby centred on collecting and caring for artefacts over time to increase their value, demonstrating wealth, status and cultural sophistication. In my experience, producers, buyers and sellers of these items often have little knowledge or appreciation of the bird's status, distribution or the threats it faces in the wild. Their focus is typically on the aesthetic, historical or cultural value of the objects, with conservation rarely a consideration whatsoever. But could this practice of transforming Helmeted Hornbill casques into collectibles hold the key to the species' recovery, rather than its demise?

PAUL JEPSON

The author in Helmeted Hornbill habitat with Anto. To protect the species, conservationists like Anto work to reduce poaching and illegal trade by enforcing laws and empowering local communities to monitor and protect habitats and raise awareness of their decline.

Some 20 years ago, forward-thinking professionals introduced the concept of protecting forests by measuring their carbon storage and selling carbon credits to environmentally conscious companies. Today, wealthy citizens and forward-thinking companies are searching for meaningful ways to align their lives and values with tangible actions to recover nature. Could we reimagine wenwan for conservation? A Helmeted Hornbill artefact – beautifully crafted from modern materials, available in limited editions tied to the hornbill population of a specific area, and linked to digital benefits – could offer a way forward. These hybrid physical and digital creations would not only reflect the artistry and cultural heritage once tied to hornbill ivory but also embody a new story of regeneration, conservation and co-existence.

Bird conservation, like nature itself, must constantly evolve. Helmeted Hornbill symbolises the extraordinary outcomes of evolution. It is time for nature-minded birders to respond with an equally extraordinary approach to its conservation and recovery. ■

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This month's panel: Mike Alibone, Mark Avery, Keith Betton, David Callahan, Rob Hume and Josh Jones

Vantage point

Flying higher, Hawke's Vantage HD binocular range moves up to deliver improved definition. *Mike Alibone* takes a comparative look at two popular models.

Hawke Vantage HD 8x34 and 8x42 binoculars

Right: The Hawke Vantage HD 8x42 is optically improved on its predecessor.

VANTAGE, Hawke's entry-level binocular range, has moved up a notch to provide a new series of 'HD' models. With some added, unrevealed adjustments, they are optically improved and only slightly higher in price.

At the expense of adding a mere 12 g to the weight of the standard Vantage 8x32 binocular, the brand has upped the ante with the Vantage HD 8x34, the wider-objective diameter securing an increased light-gathering capacity of some 16%. The 8x42 has also seen a 40 g addition to the mass of the original model. At 430 g and 595 g respectively, they are still among the lightest on the market.

Below: The smaller model, the 8x34, replaces the old 8x32, promising increased light-gathering capacity.

8x34
HAWKE
VANTAGE HD
WATERPROOF
FOV 372ft @1000

	HD 8x34	HD 8x42
Price (£)	169	139
Size (mm)	145 x 110	132 x 102
Weight (g)	430	595
Field of view (m at 1,000 m)	124	124
Light transmission (%)	not available	not available
Close focus (m)	3	2
Gas-filled	yes	yes
Waterproof	yes	yes
Guarantee (years)	Lifetime	Lifetime

The chassis is built from polycarbonate to help keep the weight low and I found the weight of the 34-mm model to feel amazingly light. Sturdy and robust, both models have the same textured, non-slip rubber body armour with very shallow thumb rests to aid holding. As in the other models in the range, the armour is broadened and turned in around the objectives to provide an increased level of protection in this potentially vulnerable area.

Weather protection

Both models have very supple, flexibly fitting rainguards, with that of the smaller model made of a slightly thinner rubber, which makes it lighter. They also have the customary loop-on rubber objective covers but those on the 34-mm model do not stay in place particularly securely and are prone to becoming detached, even when removing the binocular from its case. This is likely the result of the fact that the periphery which fits over the chassis is shallow because of the short distance available between the end of the lens housing and the hinge at the objective end.

At the opposite end, the milled dioptre wheel on both models is on the right eyepiece and while both hold their positions when set, that of the smaller model turns more smoothly but this could be simply a feature associated with individual pieces of equipment.

In both models, the strap lugs are minimised in terms of protrusion but they are still opposite the focusing wheel, although less so on the larger model, the wheel of which is deeper.

While both focusing wheels turned smoothly, I found the wheel on the larger model offered more turning resistance than that of the smaller model and, again, this might just be a function of individual pieces of equipment.

There are, however, some differences in operational focusing. On the larger model, the number of anticlockwise rotations of the focusing wheel required to take the image from close focus to infinity is 2.2, while 1.6 rotations take the image from close focus to long distance. It takes only a quarter of a turn to move the focused image from 10 m to long distance, therefore proving relatively fast in the range in which it is most frequently utilised.

The smaller model takes 1.7 anticlockwise turns of the focusing wheel between close focus and infinity and, like the larger model, it's approximately a quarter of a turn between 10 m and long distance.

Close-focus disparities

My measurement of the close-focus distances differed from those quoted by the manufacturer, these being 3.6 m and 2.5 m as opposed to 3 m and 2 m for the 8x34 and the 8x42 respectively. Arguably, this is not a big deal.

Both models have twist out, thinly rubber-shrouded eyecups that are reasonably comfortable against the eye, click-stopping in two positions above the base setting. In each case, I could still see the full field of view when the eyecups were fully extended.

In terms of image quality, there is very minimal curvature of field and both are not sharp at the extreme edges. While both have chromatic aberration across the field, it is admirably low and not of any serious concern. Both models present clean, bright images with natural colours – even on a dull day, although the larger model delivers the brightest image, as would be expected given the larger diameter objectives. The latter is evident in dull daylight conditions and even more so during low light at dusk.

While both still represent excellent value for money, based on the comparison between the two models, I felt more comfortable with the 8x42 as a result of its marginally brighter image, but for compactness and low weight the 8x34 may prove equally attractive.

In addition to the aforementioned peripheral accessories, both Vantage HD models come with a comfortable, padded neck strap and soft carry case with an internal drawstring bag and strap. Both models represent very good value. ■

Verdict

✔ Lightweight and compact
✔ Clean, bright image
✘ Loose rainguard on 8x34 model

An excellent birding adventure

MANY older British birders will remember the notorious Channel 4 documentary *Encounters: Twitchers* (1996), which attempted to nail the competitive end of the then-current birding scene by visiting Scilly at its rarity-chasing peak, as well as the 2010 BBC Four film, *Twitchers: A Very British Obsession*, which covered similar ground on a more nationwide basis.

Since then, the controversial mantle of 'sports birding' – with birds largely reduced to a tally and birders as somewhat acrimonious contestants – has migrated across the Atlantic, where pockets are deeper, journeys longer and rivalries even more dramatic. The moment when this happened could perhaps be traced back to Mark Obmascik's excellent book about his year of competitive listing, *The Big Year* (2005), and its fictionalised, star-studded movie version in 2011.

The potential of birding as a source of intrigue and human spectacle has not evaded the creative brains of the Stateside brothers Owen and Quentin Reiser, the former directing and the latter starring, despite their novice status prior to the film, they decided almost randomly to do a US 'big year' in the Lower 48 states and make a movie about it while they did. This impulsive behaviour might be a red flag for some viewers, but the results are surprisingly knowledgeable, sympathetic and, indeed, entertaining.

The film gets off to shaky start when high-quality footage of a winter Dunlin is mistakenly labelled as a Sanderling. I feared the worst, but this is a minor blip in what is actually a very engaging two-hour ride. The brothers' convoluted journey is packed with incident, and they examine the modern scene with insight – interviewing key US listers, lampooning moderators or 'eBird cops', and exploring the in-fighting of local record submissions and assessments.

There is some delicious footage of American birds and the film is edited deftly, the two hours flying by. Particularly touching was Quentin's reminiscence of high-school soccer practice inspired by the calls of Common Nighthawk that he heard overhead as a child. He ends up genuinely excited by birding, even exclaiming "I'd run through a brick for that bird!" when seeing his first Montezuma Quail (hell, so would I).

Perhaps the Reisers' biggest hurdle was their lack of birding experience. However, it is perhaps galling to note that the many years of experience in the field that so many of us have gained can be partially circumvented using modern technology. Their steep learning curve was fast-tracked by their use of online birding ID tools, apps such as Merlin and platforms including eBird to help them to hit the ground running.

Oddly, due to the brothers' stoner accents and clothing, *Listers* also resembles a 1990s artefact such as the 'grunge movies' *Clerks* or *Wayne's World* in tone and attitude. It doesn't shy away from toilet humour – literally – and the more sensitive viewer may not approve of some of the language, but there are few birders, old or young, who won't find this road-trip documentary a real hoot and worth their time.

David Callahan

LISTERS
QUENTIN REISER, OWEN REISER,
MARY LARNER, SPARKY STENSAAS, ROBERT CARTER,
ALEX LAMOREAUX, THE McQUADES, EZEKIAL DOBSON, ALEX PATIA
HANNAH TOUTONGHI, LIAM HUTCHESON MASON KELLY

More info

- *Listers: A Glimpse Into Extreme Birdwatching* directed by Owen Reiser, starring Quentin Reiser (2025). Stream on YouTube: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=zl-wAqpIQAo**

YouTube

Access all areas?

I'M a fan of Patrick Galbraith's writing. His book *In Search of One Last Song* was my blog's book of the year in 2022 but this is an even better read. Here, again, Galbraith travels the land and talks to some interesting people in some interesting places. The subject of those conversations is largely access to the countryside.

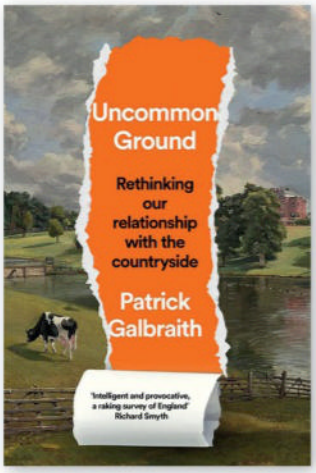
And again, the author lets the interviewees speak to the reader. His own opinions don't dominate and aren't wholly clear to me. If you look at the access issue in binary terms then both sides get some brickbats from the author – I liked that.

I found the book helpful to nudge my own thinking along a bit. I don't really buy that there is an actual right to roam and I find some of the arguments that are put forward to attempt to justify increased access to be nonsensical. But on the other hand, some exclusions that exist seem to me to be high-handed, mean-spirited and unjustifiable. The worst arguments, to my mind, are those that claim that wildlife will almost always benefit and not be harmed from increased public access. I can't see much evidence for that. The strongest argument for increased access being benign to wildlife depends on hardly anybody taking up the opportunity to stroll around in new places, which rather undermines the need to bother with it in the first place.

The author talks to, and listens to, quite a lot of people to whom I've talked and listened over the years. I recognise their words and their views in this book. One can't help but think that they all might benefit from reading this book and even more, if they had the conversations with each other that might be even more beneficial. I'm grateful to Patrick Galbraith for having those conversations and writing them down so that many more of us can have access to the varying thoughts and opinions on this subject.

Even if you aren't the least bit fussed about access to the countryside this is such an interesting look at the views of those who are fussed that it is a very good read. The author writes beautifully and with nods to many other aspects of human life. ***Mark Avery***

This review was originally published at ***markavery.info/blog.***


Uncommon Ground
Rethinking our relationship with the countryside
Patrick Galbraith
'Intelligent and provocative, a raking survey of England' Richard Smyth

More info

- *Uncommon Ground* by Patrick Galbraith (William Collins, 2025).
- 368 pages.
- ISBN: 9780008644406. Hbk, £22.

Capturing the coast

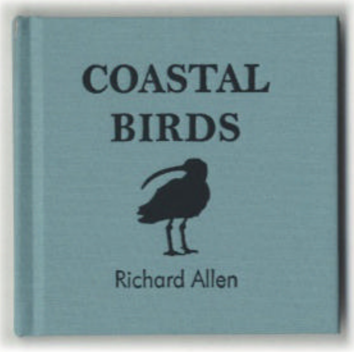
THIS delightful little square-coaster-sized book from well-known bird artist Richard Allen certainly brings a smile to the face. Focusing on 26 bird species typical of the UK's coastal or marine environments, the revised and expanded edition of *Coastal Birds* presents a series of Richard's striking linocuts.

Among those birds treated are some of our most familiar, beloved and in some cases endangered species. The artist's powerful work is balanced with a short blurb of text introducing each bird, with snippets on behaviour, range, migration, food and relationship with humans scattered within. It complements the previously released *Garden Birds*, which follows a similar format for species more commonly seen in our backyards.

Produced in hardback with a classy bookcloth finish, this is a quaint work of art that will work as nicely as a decorative piece as it would for inspiring people to delve deeper into the wonderful world of birds. ***Josh Jones***

More info

- *Coastal Birds* by Richard Allen (Jardine Press, 2025).
- 60 pages, 26 linocut prints.
- ISBN: 9781838227258. Hbk, £15.
- Available to purchase at **www.jardinepress.co.uk**



Gurney commemorated

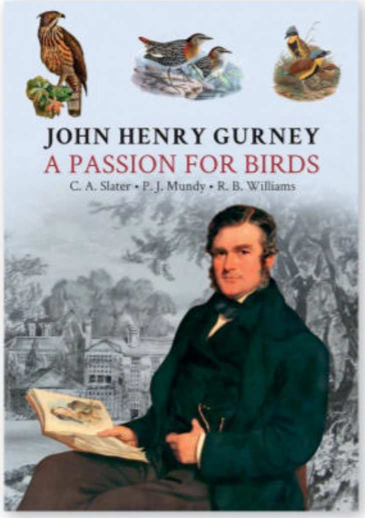
GURNEY is a name that will be familiar to most birders. Many will have heard of Gurney's Pitta, and the man himself wrote a monograph on Northern Gannet. Otherwise, his contributions to ornithology are perhaps forgotten or overlooked – something this book puts right.

This is an almost obsessive record of every scrap of evidence related to Gurney, his early life and business, and his long and remarkable involvement with bird collectors, scientists, writers and bird artists worldwide. As each contact is introduced, so we learn, too, a great deal about them. There are plenty of shooters, hunters and professional collectors. Verreaux – he of the eagle – assured Gurney that he knew the difference between male and female Bateleurs: after all, he had killed a hundred. It was a very different time when comparative ornithology and taxonomy relied on specimens – dead birds – that are still so important today. Gurney had 4,900 specimens, mainly birds of prey and contributed by more than 400 people, which were displayed in Norwich – a collection that has simply disappeared.

Specimens came to Gurney from around the world and he spent years working out species, subspecies and variations, coming back to particularly knotty problems time and again. Many people named birds after Gurney; he named many after others. All of this is documented in this immensely authoritative volume, with 75 pages of notes and 22 of references. It is a good, illuminating read about a period of ornithology so very different from today. ***Rob Hume***

More info

- *John Henry Gurney: A Passion for Birds* by Clive Slater, Peter Mundy and Raymond Williams (John Beaufoy Publishing, 2025).
- 472 pages, 135 illustrations.
- ISBN: 9781913679743. Hbk, £39.99.



Africa's ecoregions

I have been lucky enough to visit quite a bit of Africa for birding, so on receiving this, the latest in the *Habitats of the World* series, I set myself the challenge to write down how many habitats I could think of. I like to think I am imaginative, but I could only come up with 12. To my shame, I then saw that the authors have covered 85 major African habitats in this book. These are not only landscapes; they extend to marine habitats too. Some of these are immense, but importantly, others are quite restricted, and they often contain the most endangered birds.

So having been to north-west Zambia a while back, I decided to look at a really restricted habitat: the tall, dry woodland which is known locally as Mavunda. There are five pages devoted to this great birding ecozone (home to Margaret's Batis and Gorgeous Bushshrike, to mention two species).

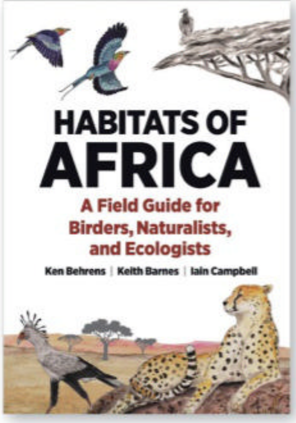
The layout for each habitat is the same with concise sections such as 'In a Nutshell' to convey in fewer than 20 words what it is. Then there is a list of other habitats that have affinities with the one you are reading about. A more detailed description of the habitat follows but, importantly, this is written in an engaging way, minimising complex terminology. A section on conservation outlines the many challenges that face this habitat, and if protection is in place it is explained. A section on wildlife covers the main taxa, and includes a decent amount of bird information. Finally, there is a section on distribution so you can work out how to see this habitat and a list of key sites supporting it, such as national parks.

A book with this title could be dull, but each page has several photographs and there are many useful diagrams and maps too. Personally, I hope that at some point Princeton will look at publishing this book (and others in the *Habitats of the World* series) as larger-format titles with more space for larger images and text. To me, this is a book I want to work on before a trip, and I do not see it as a field guide.

Introductory pages explain more generally the structure of Africa and its climate, taking each of the regions in turn. The subsequent habitat descriptions are grouped by main habitat type rather than region, which makes perfect sense. So, my Mavunda habitat is one of 10 considered within a grouping called 'Warm Humid Broadleaf Forests'.

Probably the most important thing that this book does is make you aware of habitats that do not get mentioned in regular conversation. Without this kind of input, we would all simply talk about the 12 habitats that I could remember!

Keith Betton


HABITATS OF AFRICA
A Field Guide for Birders, Naturalists, and Ecologists
Ken Behrens | Keith Barnes | Iain Campbell

More info

- *Habitats of Africa: A Field Guide for Birders, Naturalists, and Ecologists* by Ken Behrens, Keith Barnes and Iain Campbell (Princeton University Press, 2025).
- 448 pages. Many colour photos, illustrations and maps.
- ISBN: 9780691244761. Pbk, £30.

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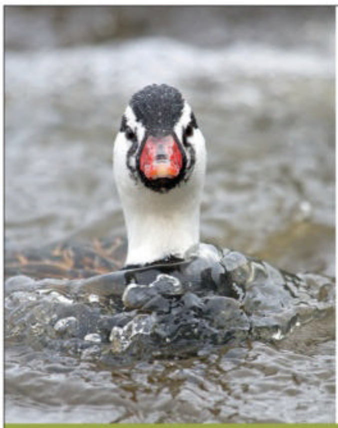

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This month's panel includes: Keith Betton, Kit Day, Chris Harbard, Matt Phelps and Amy Robjohns

IN THE GARDEN

Winter is coming

JOSH JONES

By November, our resident populations of thrushes, including Song Thrush, will have been bolstered by winter visitors from more northerly breeding populations, such as those in Scandinavia.

NOVEMBER is the month when autumn finally gives way to winter. The clocks have gone back, the days are significantly shorter and frosts are back in fashion. Birdlife mirrors this shift in the seasons: the very last stragglers among our summer visitors have departed, and winter flocks are building – Redwings and Fieldfares chattering in the hedgerows, finches gathering on seed heads, and local populations of common garden species such as Blackbird, European Robin and Song Thrush being bolstered by their Scandinavian cousins. It's a quieter time in the garden in terms of colour and activity, but for wildlife November is about survival, and what we do in our own spaces can make all the difference.

As always, it's natural to feel the urge to tidy. The herbaceous borders are collapsing into a tangle, the vegetable patch is all but finished, and damp leaves will smother paths and lawns. Yet restraint is the gardener's best gift to wildlife now. Seed heads left standing, such as teasels, coneflowers and sunflowers, are a natural larder for various passerines. Stems of dead perennials shelter hibernating insects, while the hollow cavities of grasses and umbellifers hold the eggs and larvae of next year's pollinators. Resist the urge to use the secateurs a little longer and your garden will be richer for it.

As the nights grow longer, birds and overwintering butterflies will be seeking safe roosts. Dense evergreen shrubs and hedges, ivy-clad fences and even log piles provide vital cover. If you've been considering planting hedging, now is the perfect time. Hawthorn, Blackthorn and Dog Rose all create dense nesting and roosting habitat, while providing blossom and fruit through the seasons.

Water is another overlooked essential in November, even though summer's drought may seem a dim and distant memory. Natural water sources can freeze, so even a simple bird bath can be a lifeline. Keep it topped up and, on frosty mornings, break the ice rather than removing it entirely – birds are just as thirsty in winter as in summer.

Don't forget food. Feeders hung with sunflower hearts, peanuts and suet attract a lively mix of tits, finches and woodpeckers, but don't feel the need to provide too much. Leaf litter left beneath shrubs will be worked by Blackbirds and robins hunting for worms and beetles, while fallen apples can sustain thrushes well into December. Even what looks like waste can be a feast. If you have plenty of surplus apples, keep some in storage in case of a sudden cold snap later in the winter.

As I write this in mid-September, the 2025 garden year list stands at 89 species. Perhaps the most common species not to have previously made an appearance in or near the garden, a long-awaited Eurasian Treecreeper was in my neighbour's tree briefly on the morning of 28 August, followed by an appearance by another or the same bird on 31st. On 1 September I finally put to bed the woes of August with a bona fide Western Cattle Egret flying south. Vis-mig is starting to get going with the first waves of Meadow Pipits and Eurasian Siskins in evidence overhead in the past week or so.

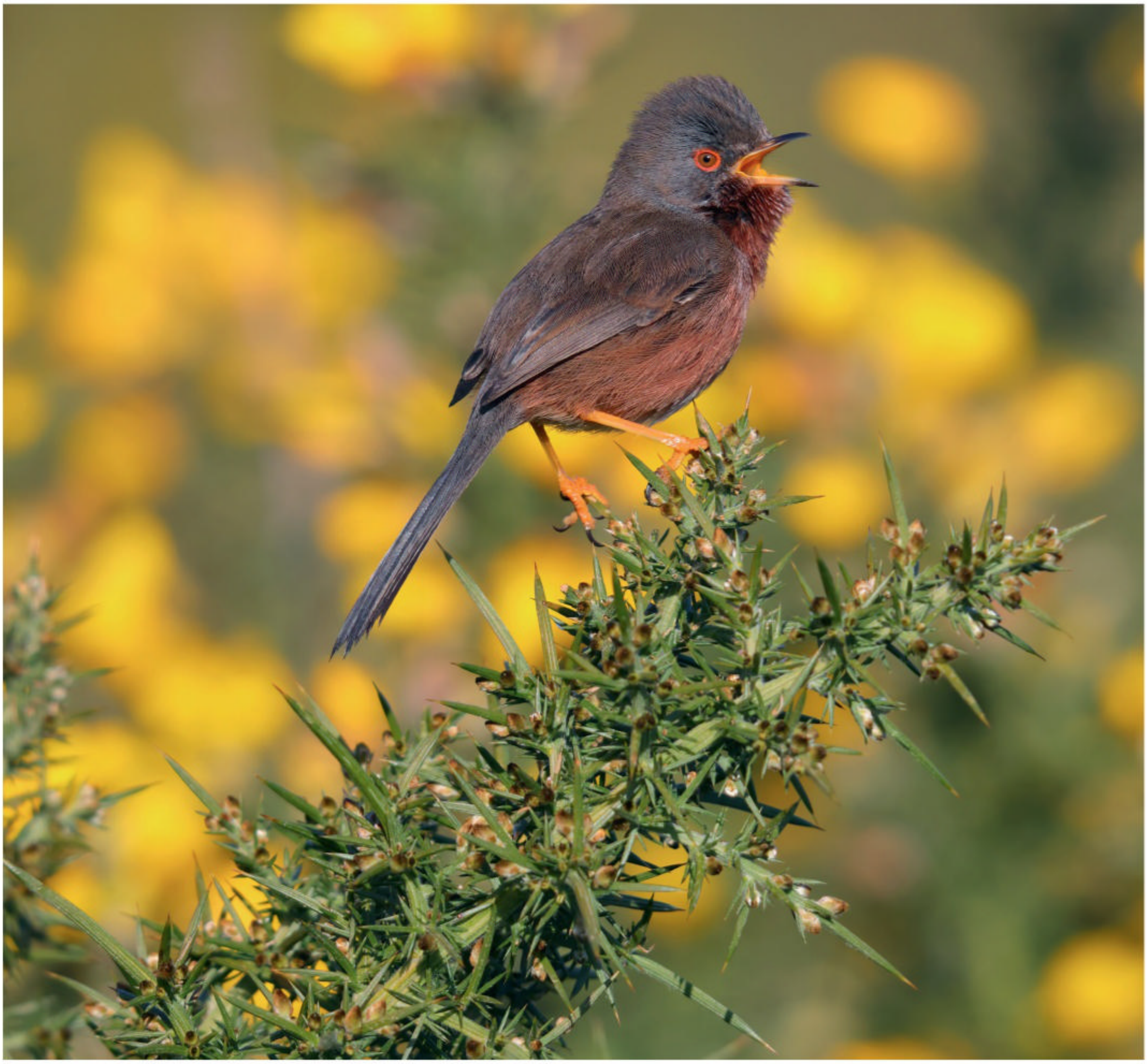
Moth-trapping is slowing down, but I'll keep the trap going on milder nights in November, just in case. Who knows – maybe a migrant Silver Y or even a late Vestal might still appear.

November is not the most flamboyant month in the garden. but it's one of the most important. By resisting the temptation to clear away what looks spent we give birds, insects and mammals the chance to endure the cold months ahead. In doing so, we also extend our own connection with the rhythms of the season – finding joy in a mixed tit flock moving through bare branches, or in the thin *tseep* of a Redwing drifting down out of the night sky. ***Matt Phelps***

MATT PHELPS

Matt enjoyed adding Western Cattle Egret to his growing garden list in early September when one flew over.

ALL IMAGES BY KIT DAY



BEHIND THE LENS

Ideal surroundings

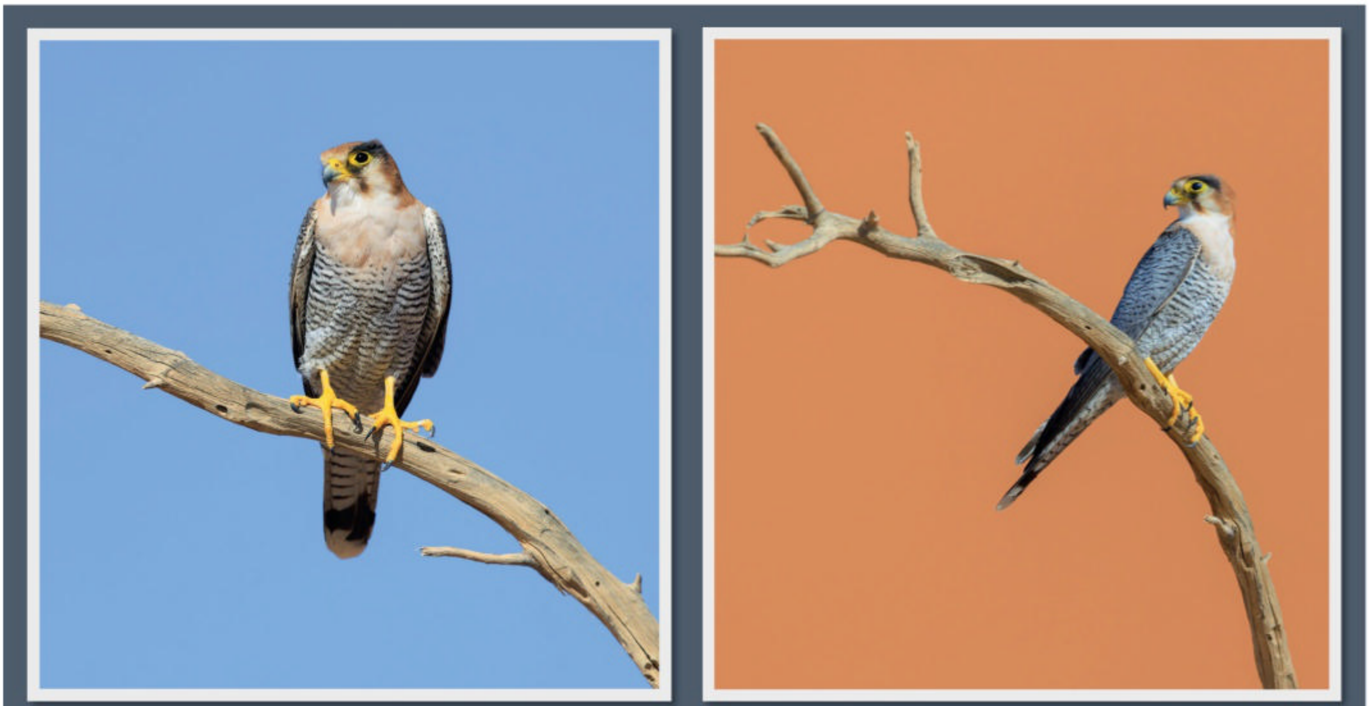
IN the heat of the moment, it's easy to forget about the surroundings and keep your eyes glued to the bird, watching for the perfect pose or interesting behaviour. That's important of course. But even after cropping, and unless you're going for the big close-up recently discussed in this column (*Birdwatch* 399: 62-63), the majority of a bird photograph isn't about the bird at all – it's the foreground and background. Setting the bird in the best surroundings possible can turn a good photograph into a great one.

The key thing most bird photographers aim for is to minimise distractions in the foreground and background. This allows the bird to take centre stage. All too often there is some vegetation impeding part of the bird, and with any luck this is easily cured by switching up your angle. But almost as importantly, a step or two to one side can also improve the background. You might be able to avoid a patch of white sky, a reflection behind the bird or a stick appearing to protrude from its head. A backdrop of pleasantly consistent colour really can make a huge difference compared to a messy patchwork of whiteness and vegetation, or even a jarring 50/50 split.

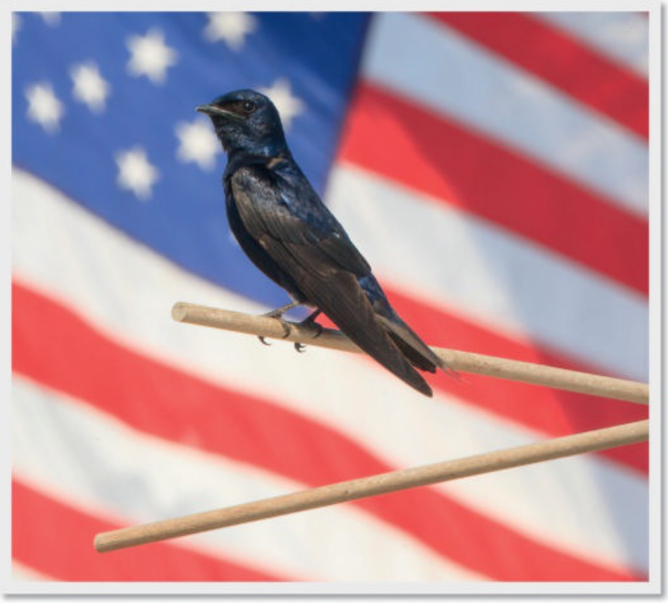
When photographing birds on the ground or on water, getting a lower angle will improve your backgrounds no end (assuming the subject isn't lurking against reeds or other 'messy' vegetation). The lower you can get, the further away the water or grass behind the bird is from the subject itself, and the smoother and more diffuse your background will be as a result.

An acceptable background might vary depending on the bird. Some scrub-loving species will simply prefer the protection of a tangle of vegetation and look most at home in this setting, while you've got to be lucky to photograph a Eurasian Bittern or a Water Rail a long way from the cover of reeds.

The super-telephoto lenses we use for bird photography generally offer a nice narrow depth of field, but if you can do so, getting closer to the bird will reduce this even more, throwing its surroundings further out of focus. Combine this with shooting 'wide open' at the widest aperture (smallest f number) that your lens allows for the smoothest results. Occasionally you might want to do the opposite and make a feature



Switching angle and moving further away from the bird enabled Kit to get a large sand dune behind this Red-necked Falcon for something different.



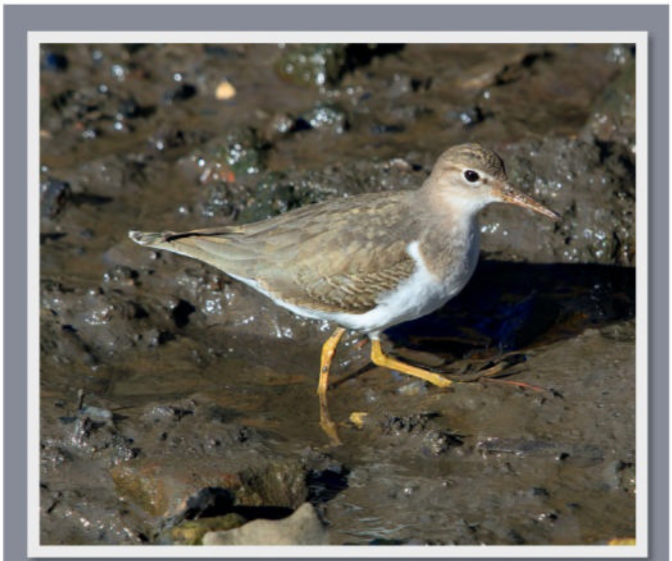
A male Purple Martin poses in front of the 'Stars and Stripes'. Sometimes the background can be as much of a feature of the image as the bird.

of the background, in which case, stop down to a larger f number to bring it more into focus.

It's very easy to get hung up on the background, aiming for a perfectly uncluttered image every time. In pursuit of this, there's a growing trend among bird photographers to heavily blur or even replace large parts of the background in post-processing. Even with the clever automatic-selection tools on offer today, this is difficult to do perfectly; I spot a lot of images online where the photographer is trying to pull a fast one and has left behind tell-tale signs of some extensive 'work'.

Of course, one person's clutter is another person's habitat, and the cornerstone of a bird photo will always be the bird itself! Whatever you're aiming for, if you can keep one eye on what the bird is up to and the other on its surroundings, there's a good chance you'll be even happier with your shots when you come to review them later. ***Kit Day***

Top left: Discernible or noticeable vegetation in the background of a bird photo doesn't always equate to undesirable clutter. A singing Dartford Warbler looks particularly fine against a backdrop of flowering gorse.



A lower angle on this Spotted Sandpiper (below) gave a more diffuse background and helped throw all the lumps of brick and plastic bags in its favoured creek out of focus!

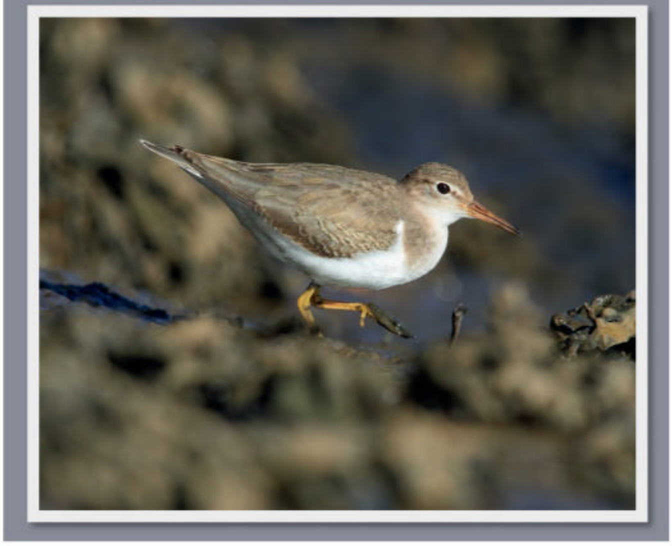


PHOTO TARGET

European Robin

WITH December almost upon us again, why not think about turning some of your bird photographs into a 2026 calendar or Christmas card for your family and friends? November is a good time to photograph European Robin, a staple species of both these crafts, as numbers in the UK are swelled by continental visitors in winter.

Common, widespread, and bold almost to the point of being friendly, robins in the UK provide a lovely photographic subject. They are easily coaxed in with seed or mealworms, so it's a relatively straightforward task to get them in a photogenic setting.

A natural perch and smooth, diffuse, green background are good starting points, but equally, why not go for something a bit different? If you want that smooth backdrop, make sure whatever is behind your chosen perch is far enough away that the background is properly blurred.

To minimise background distractions, use the widest aperture/smallest f number your equipment will allow. However, you might prefer to stop down a bit to bring more of the bird into the plane of focus, particularly in bad light and if your robin is very close, which can often happen with this most confiding of species. ***Kit Day***

KIT DAY

November is a good time to try and photograph the familiar and common European Robin. If you get some good shots you can use them for Christmas cards in December!

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Ripe old age

IAN BOLLEN

Manx Shearwater can live for a long time. The oldest recorded British individual was 50 years and 11 months.

THERE are many reasons why birds are interesting – but one thing stands out when comparing them with other wildlife such as mammals. Birds show little sign of ageing, living two to three times longer than similar-sized mammals. What's more, they don't exhibit signs of increased mortality due to ageing. Quite why this is the case is not clear but one theory is that the ability to fly, which enables birds to migrate, requires strong muscles and the means to both navigate and to remember geographic locations. Flying is a means of avoiding predation as well as finding food and shelter, while also keeping birds fit and healthy.

Fifty years of research into Greater Flamingos in the Camargue, France, has found a clear difference between those which are resident and those which migrate to Italy, Spain or North Africa. Residents are more successful at breeding than migrants, producing more young, but start to age earlier than the migrants. The ageing process progresses more rapidly with their ability to breed declining faster. Migrants, however, do not live as long as residents, surviving 25 years on average compared to the 33 years of residents. But with ageing happening 40% more quickly, the residents lose out in the long run.

In many living creatures, life expectancy is related to body size. While this is the case in some birds, such as hummingbirds living only a few years and eagles reaching in excess of 30 years, there are exceptions. Birds which are strong flyers over long distances, such as seabirds and waders, live longer than sedentary species which fly weakly. The longest-living bird in terms of body size is Manx Shearwater. A female Laysan Albatross known as 'Wisdom' reached the amazing age of at least 74 in 2024 and even laid an egg in November of that year. In her lifetime she is known to have laid more than 50 eggs, raising 30 chicks.

Most of what we know about the ages of birds comes from ringing. As of 2023, BTO stats show that the top five oldest British non-passerines were Manx Shearwater (50 years, 11 months), Northern Fulmar (45 years, 9 months), Puffin (42 years), Razorbill (41 years, 11 months) and Eurasian Oystercatcher (41 years, 1 month). The top five oldest British passerines were all corvids, with Chough (23 years, 10 months) the oldest, followed by Rook (22 years, 11 months), Magpie (21 years, 8 months), Carrion Crow (20 years, 10 months) and Jackdaw (19 years, 5 months).

In Continental Europe, seabirds, waders and corvids also hold the records. However, some other species have been recorded living long lives, as shown in the table (left). ***Chris Harbard***

Species	Country	Age
Tufted Duck	Denmark	45 years, 3 months
Purple Heron	The Netherlands	44 years, 8 months
Alpine Swift	Switzerland	26 years
Common Starling	Denmark	22 years, 11 months
Mistle Thrush	Switzerland	21 years, 5 months
Chaffinch	Lithuania	21 years, 3 months
Sand Martin	Channel Islands	21 years
White Wagtail	The Netherlands	20 years, 10 months
Dunnock	Denmark	20 years, 10 months
Reed Bunting	Switzerland	20 years

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Beak tweak

WIKIMEDIA

In the US, Common Starling is non-native and it has been found that these birds' beaks are now 8% longer than those in Europe.

MORPHOLOGICAL changes within bird species usually happen slowly, evolving over time. Sometimes a genetic mutation may result in a sudden advantageous change and environmental factors, such as drought, may result in food availability changing with the result that certain physical features are favoured. Most famously, the difference in the beaks of Darwin's finches is a result of environmental factors influencing seed size, thus favouring certain beak sizes. Even more startling differences can be found within the same species. One finch from Cameroon, Black-bellied Seedcracker, exists in three genetically distinct forms each having a different beak size. If large-billed and small-billed birds paired up, the offspring would have a standard 3:1 mix of large- and small-billed offspring. Large-billed birds can eat larger and harder seeds than small-billed birds. A third 'mega' form exists with an even larger beak, and larger body size with its own mitochondrial differences.

Research into Great Tit populations in the UK and the Netherlands has shown that in only 50 years the beak of British Great Tits has become longer than those on the Continent. Over that period the main difference between the populations is that British birds feed more at feeders and it appears that this has affected certain genes of the British population. In North America, researchers have shown that in the 1950s the feeding of hummingbirds with sugar solution grew in popularity and as this proliferated, so the length of Anna's Hummingbird beaks gradually became longer and larger while at the same time their range increased. As they spread northwards, beaks became shorter and smaller in colder regions.

Common Starling is loved by some and hated by others. In North America, where the species was introduced, it has become a pest due to consuming agricultural crops and livestock food. A recent study compared the introduced populations in North America with native birds from Europe and Asia. The results showed that beak length in North America is now 8% longer than beaks in the native range and the main difference that might explain this is diet, with North American birds widely feeding on livestock food. ***Chris Harbard***

ON THE PATCH

Remembering ... November

AMY ROBJOHNS

Each year, Black Redstart is a regular November treat for Amy on her Titchfield Haven patch.

I'VE had some great patch memories from November, as late autumn transitions to winter. The most unexpected highlight during this month was a Barred Warbler found by a local birder at Titchfield Haven in 2017. It later relocated to the small garden at the back of Haven House, where it remained for much of the winter. Siberian Chiffchaff is a much more frequent scarcity on my patch but is always nice to find. One particular highlight was a fine singing male in 2021 – the first time I'd heard this striking form's song. Continuing the trend for warblers, a Yellow-browed Warbler also appeared this month during 2020.

Leach's Storm Petrel is another November highlight. The only one I've seen to date was on 1 November 2022. The bird lingered long enough for me to twitch it during a lunch break and watch it feeding and sat on the sea. Stormy conditions can be productive this month and have yielded good numbers of Kittiwake passing through, whereas calm days have on occasions been good for observing auks sat on the sea. Flocks of Common Eider and Common Scoter are sometimes joined by Velvet Scoter.

This is the month in which Great Northern Divers tend to appear – up to three may be present in some years. The days can be chilly, especially when there's an easterly element to the wind, but these are made worthwhile with small numbers of Black-necked or Slavonian Grebes passing through. Here on my patch, Black-necked is the scarcer of the two, but November is a good month to see them. Red-necked Grebe is even rarer in the local area and it was only in 2018 that I found my first patch record – a fine bird on 17 November. As usually seems to be the way with this species in The Solent, the bird vanished only minutes after appearing.

Influxes and movements occur overhead, too. Impressive Woodpigeon migration is an annual feature, while in 2020 there were plenty of Crossbills including up to 18 in one day. Brambling and Redpoll are two species also often recorded as fly-overs.

Every year I look forward to Black Redstarts briefly taking up residence around the Meon Shore Chalets. It's lovely to spend time watching them, trying to work out which roof they might pop up on next!

A small number of Jack Snipe overwinter on my patch but they can be very hard to see. It was exciting to watch one bobbing up and down in November 2021. Finally, Short-eared Owls rarely linger at Titchfield Haven these days, but a dusk visit with fellow patch birders in 2015 was successful as we were treated to one quartering the water meadows along the canal path.

Amy Robjohns

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The Netherlands

SOME country profiles extoll the huge list of exciting species that can be seen. However, in this case, most of the birds on offer are familiar to us, and we can easily see them within a few hours of home. The difference that makes the Netherlands special is the sheer volume of birds involved – particularly in August as huge numbers of waders use the East Atlantic Flyway between the Arctic and Africa. At any one time, there can be up to six million birds present in the Wadden Sea, and many of them are in the Netherlands. A good place to witness huge numbers is Westhoek in Friesland. If you are used to getting excited by two or three Curlew Sandpipers in the UK, then get ready for a shock! In August this year there were 1,000 Curlew Sands on some days, with 600 Avocet and 500 Whimbrel. In addition, you can see up to 3,000 Common Shelduck.

JOSH JONES

The Netherlands is famous for its wintering geese. Along with Barnacle Goose, Greater White-fronted Goose (pictured) is the most numerous species, with many thousands present on the country's polders each winter.

If finding migrants and vagrants is your aim, the island of Texel is a great place in spring or autumn. The car ferry from Den Helder takes only 20 minutes (although you may have to queue). This is the location for the Wadden Bird Festival, which includes a 'green' bird race (in 2026 this runs on 9-10 May). The island of Schiermonnikoog has many options, but only on foot or bike. Perhaps hire a bike in Lauwersoog before you get on the ferry.

A winter trip to the coast north of Amsterdam can be special with large numbers of geese – mainly Barnacle Geese, but thousands of Greater White-fronted and a few Lesser White-fronted too. The last are primarily from the Swedish reintroduction programme (see pages 40-43).

Area: (% of UK):	41,865 sq km (17%)
Country checklist:	543 species
Country endemics:	None
Best time to visit:	All year round
Target for a trip:	125-175 species (one week) depending on season

KEITH BETTON

White-tailed Eagle has increased dramatically in the Netherlands, with no fewer than 40 pairs estimated to breed in the country.

Small numbers of Tundra Bean Geese can be found and there are good chances of seeing Hen Harrier and Great Grey Shrike.

Spring is a great time for visiting the Netherlands and there are many wetland reserves around the artificially created IJsselmeer – now the largest lake in Western Europe, covering 1,100 sq km. The best location by far is Oostvaardersplassen, a wetland of 56 sq km with many viewpoints and walking trails. In addition to breeding waders, you can expect to find Savi's, Great Reed, Marsh and Icterine Warblers and Bluethroat. White-tailed Eagles are present all year and numbers are increasing, with 20 birds in April 2025. You will only see occasional Purple Herons, but there are often more than 100 Great Egrets.

Away from the coast, you can travel east or south to explore woodland with Black and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and Short-toed Treecreeper. Crested Tit, Golden Oriole and Red-backed Shrike are present in small numbers. Towards the German border your chances for Eurasian Eagle-Owl increase and a pair has nested for several years in the Winterswijk Quarry, where there is a dedicated viewpoint.

Thousands of sightings giving exact co-ordinates, often published within minutes of the observation, can be found at **waarneming.nl**. You can even search the vicinity of where you want to go within a 10-km radius. You can also search for mammals including Wolf and Wild Boar!

Getting there: There are many options for flying to Amsterdam from the UK, often for less than £100 return if bought early. You can also travel from London to Amsterdam with Eurostar in just over four hours. There are ferries to several ports from Harwich, Hull and Newcastle.

Key species: White-tailed Eagle 74-92 cm. Least Concern. The 1800s saw a major decline of this majestic species with extinctions in many European countries due to persecution and the effects of pesticides. However, the population has benefitted from extensive protection in recent years with several organised reintroductions, while in the Netherlands the first pair nested naturally in 2006. In fact, White-tailed Eagle has shown one of the highest recorded increases in population for any native species in Europe since the turn of the millennium. There are now probably 15,000 pairs in Europe, and there are around 40 pairs in the Netherlands.

Recommended book: *Collins Bird Guide* by Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterström. Collins. 2023. Paperback. £20.

Keith Betton

Your letters & photos

Tell us what you think. Write to:

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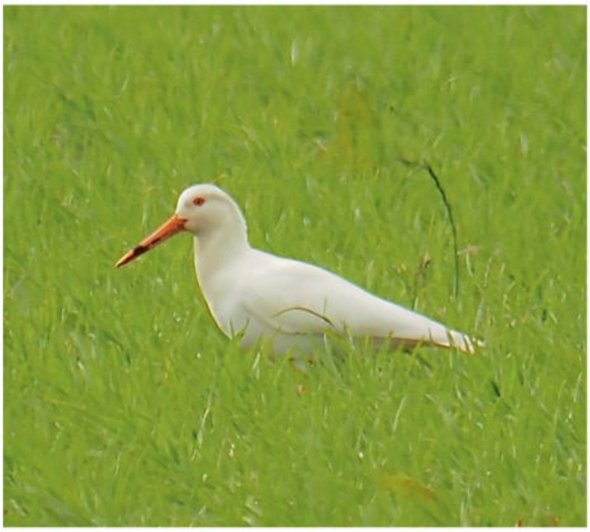


GARY EISENHAUER

Birding on the box

IN reference to Jennifer Sizeland's recent column on birding TV shows (*Birdwatch* 398: 75), I remember a comedy called *Watching* with Liza Tarbuck, Emma Wray and Paul Bown, which aired in the 1980s and 1990s. Bown's character, Malcolm, was a birder, while Wray's character, Brenda, liked people watching, but was introduced to birdwatching.

On another note, I saw this white Eurasian Oystercatcher while cycling in Orkney back in May – I thought it might be of interest. ***Gary Eisenhauer***

Golden Scilly moments

I have much enjoyed reading this year's Big Picture series on great twitches, although, not being much of a twitcher, I have never attended one of those featured gatherings. However, I have caused a famous twitch. It was on St Mary's, Scilly, in 2004 when my wife and I were there for 'teachers' week'.

On our last day there was nothing much about and, as the weather was glorious, we decided to walk round the north of St Mary's. The path between Trenoweth and Watermill passes through deep bracken. On the path just in front of me a small bird walked out of the bracken. Initial thoughts were that it was an Olive-backed Pipit but then I had a good sight of its head pattern and immediately realised it was an Ovenbird!

Although not technically a first for Britain, it was going to be the first twitchable one. Luckily, I was able to contact Will Wagstaff who managed to see the bird and confirm my identification. By the evening virtually all birders on the island had seen it and I was toasted at the Scillonian log and stood drinks in the pub. The next day, in addition to the normal flights, I was told that 24 chartered planes landed. On a previous visit, I had found the first Marsh Sandpiper for Scilly, so I am proud of being one of very few non-resident birders to have added two new species to the Scilly list. ***John Harding***

Josh Jones replies: "That's a very commendable claim to fame, John! I remember the Ovenbird well, although at the age of 14 it came just a little too early in my birding life for me to be able to afford the trip to Scilly to see it. Another twitchable Ovenbird would go down very nicely in Britain."

The Little Whimbrel twitch

YOUR feature about the Little Whimbrel at Salthouse (*Birdwatch* 399: 6-7) reminded me of our first family holiday. We arrived at a caravan park near Lowestoft on Sunday 25 August 1985 and watched local TV that evening, which featured a report on the Little Whimbrel. The next day I drove to Salthouse with my seven-year-old daughter Anna. My notes read: "On the meadows between Beach Road and Iron Road. Good 'scope views had by Anna and I, along with several hundred other birders. Present from 24 August to 3 September, second British record (first in Glamorgan 1982)."

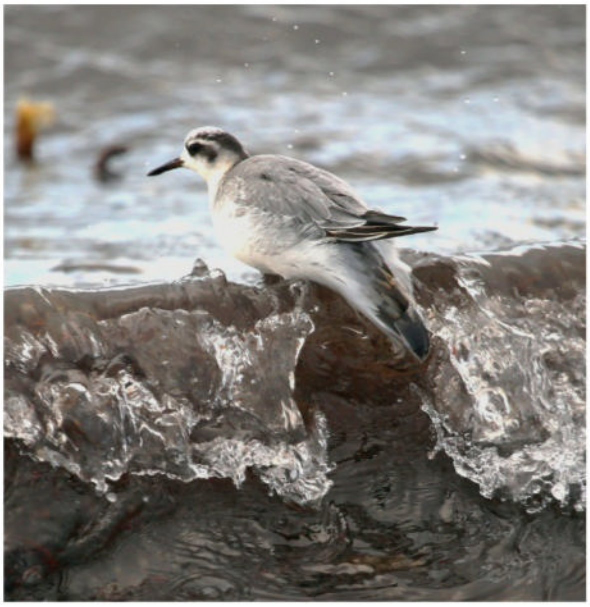
Later that week we entered Anna in a fancy-dress competition as a twitcher dressed in my camo gear carrying my bins and Hertel & Reuss scope, with a placard saying "OK, where's the Little Whimbrel?". She didn't win! Anna is now 47 with grown-up children of her own. I wonder if she remembers the Little Whimbrel? ***Patrick Bonham***

In memory of Peter Hayman

MY dear father, Peter Hayman, sadly died on 18 September at the age of 95. He was responsible for illustrations in many RSPB publications as well as the likes of *Shorebirds*, and was one of the artists for the iconic nine-volume *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*.

He was also a subscriber to *Birdwatch* and always enjoyed reading and looking at the photographs in each month's edition. More recently this involved my reading to him those pieces that had particularly piqued his attention. He also demanded that I take him to the Global BirdFair in 2023 and 2024, but was too frail to attend this year.

I dare say that many of your readers will be familiar with his work over the years. He will be sorely missed. ***Martin Hayman***



GEOFF SMITH

Geoff Smith writes: "In light of Kit Day's October photo target, I thought I would send you some shots of the Grey Phalarope that I found at Langness on the Isle of Man, where I spent the first 58 years of my life, back in November 2014."

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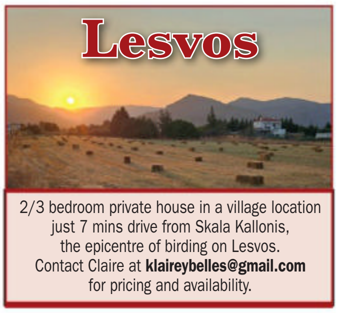

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In the next issue
December

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE BY ED STUBBS

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Bone idol Bonaparte’s Gull used to be a real rarity in Britain and Ireland, but has undergone a notable increase in records in recent years. Josh Jones takes a closer look at the rise of this elegant species on our shores.

Getting a rough idea In recent winters, Europe has experienced records of the North American *sanctijohannis* form of Rough-legged Buzzard, known as Rough-legged Hawk. This is an extremely tricky ID and Jack Ashton-Booth provides cutting-edge advice on how to call the taxon on this side of the Atlantic.

Eagles soar again The reintroduction of White-tailed Eagle into the UK was first initiated on Mull in 1975, and 2025 marks the 50th anniversary of this milestone. Dave Sexton charts the ups and downs of this ultimately successful project to restore the ‘flying barn door’.

Howay the birds In the next instalment of our county-listing series, BirdGuides sightings team member Alan Tilmouth remembers his decades of birding in Northumberland and the many rare birds and exciting encounters along the way.

Goosebumps on Islay Known for its stunning scenery and Scotland’s finest malt whiskies, Islay is perhaps the most important place in the UK for geese. Dan Brown profiles this Hebridean hot-spot.

A little slice of pitta-dise Pittas are among the most captivating and desirable families of birds. Chris Gooddie takes a look at these avian jewels and ponders why they resonate so much with birders.

***PLUS:* the BirdGuides team provides detailed round-ups of October’s exciting birding highlights, topical comment from our columnists, all the latest news and views, advice to enhance your birding knowledge, and our editorial team responds to your questions.**

December issue on sale 27 November 2025

LUCY MCROBERT

When birding isn't the answer

We frequently hear that birding is good for mental health, so birders must be the happiest people around, right? That's not quite the case, says our columnist.

A few months ago, I wrote about my 'new approach' to birding (see *Birdwatch* 395: 70). This resulted in some the most surprising reactions to any of my columns; usually, when people get in touch, they're irate as something I've written has mortally offended them. However, I've had so many lovely, personal messages from people, most of whom I've never met, relating, sharing their own stories and asking for more. Thank you if you took the time to do that.

Since writing that column, I've undergone cognitive behaviour therapy and am now in counselling. We've worked on understanding the human nervous system, and how we move regularly through a 'ladder' that varies from a state of feeling balanced, safe and connected; to mobilised (fight or flight, with increased heart rate, breathing, muscle tension and so on); to immobilised (freeze or flop, where you surrender, become compliant, feel numb, or overthink). Looking back, it's helped me see how at times I've functioned in these survival modes and explained those mysterious memory gaps.

Fast forward to late September, and I had a free day. I knew I should go birding and add at least a couple more ticks to the year list. It's autumn, after all. However, I was in a state of freeze or flop, and I just couldn't do it, or not well at least. I drove half an hour to twitch a couple of Glossy Ibis and instead wandered aimlessly around the nature reserve for 45 minutes.

Searching for answers

I attempted some grounding techniques, trying to tune into bird sounds, but my concentration lapsed almost immediately. I tried counting ducks, starting an eBird list, walking purposefully and energetically, and sitting still in a hide, but nothing could make me feel present. I all but panicked when a photographer appeared in the distance, practically hiding in a hedge to avoid conversation. I didn't feel depressed; just vacant, detached. Needless to say, I dipped the ibis (although in my defence, they weren't reported again).

We get told all the time how good birding is for us, one of the latest magic cures for mental-health problems. And for some people it is. At times, it has been my saviour, taking me from a survival state back to safety. But an East Midlands gravel pit just wasn't going to cut it, and I couldn't be bothered to travel any further. I drove home and felt better for an hour on the exercise bike, in comfy pyjamas and watching mindless television.

Understanding my own psychology has helped me understand how I bird. When I'm in my safe space, there's nothing I enjoy more than a leisurely walk with James, birding, chatting to people, listening, observing, taking pleasure in nature. That's when I learn and become a better birder. When I'm in fight or flight, I need to exercise, so my birding will often coincide with running or walking, or jumping in the car to go twitching. That's when my lists go up. If I go into that final freeze or flop state, birding isn't going to help.

ED STUBBS

Birding is often praised as a mental-health booster, so you might expect birders to be perfectly happy and balanced. Our columnist disagrees.

> "We get told all the time how good birding is for us, one of the latest magic cures for mental-health problems"

I know that mental health can be an uncomfortable topic ('why can't she just write about birds!') and I'm sorry if that's the case with you. But I've written this column for all the birders who, like me, sometimes don't take pleasure in our wonderful hobby, and maybe feel guilty about it. We hear so much about how good birding is for us, that you'd assume birders must be the most well-adjusted, mentally healthy and emotionally balanced people on the planet. Clearly, we're not. For some, birding is their anchor when they're in survival mode, fighting, flighting, freezing or flopping. For others, it's a front brain activity, to be done in an emotional state of safety. It doesn't matter which one you are. Just enjoy it your way. ■

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